Toddler Sociality:

Co-constructing the peer group through embodied interactions

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Félagslyndi ungra leikskólabarna:

Rannsókn á óyrtum félagslegum samskiptum í jafningjahópnum

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Ágrip

Doktorsrannsókn þessi fjallar um félagslyndi (e. sociality) ungra leikskólabarna með áherslu á félagslega þátttöku og færni þeirra í samskiptum við jafningja. Sérstaklega var skoðað hvernig þau beita óyrtum aðferðum til að taka virkan þátt í jafningjahóp; móta hann í samvinnu við önnur börnin og skapa samkennd og mynda tilfinningu fyrir hinu „sameiginlega við“ (e. mutual we) innan barnahópsins. Rannsóknin fór fram á ungbarnadeild í leikskóla á Íslandi og er eigindleg rannsókn á grundvelli félagsháttafræði (e. ethnomethodology), þar sem notast var við fjölháttasamtalsgreiningu (e. multimodal conversation analysis) til að rannsaka þessar óyrtu aðferðir. Rannsóknin sýnir fram á að ung börn taka virkan þátt í félagslegum samskiptum og sýna þannig fram á félagslyndi sitt.

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar hafa verið birtar í þremur ritrýndum fræðigreinum. Fyrsta greinin fjallar um þær óyrtu aðferðir sem yngstu leikskólabörnin beita til að hefja samskipti við jafningja, þar sem sjónum var beint að mikilvægi augnasambands og snertingar. Önnur greinin skoðaði hvernig yngstu leikskólabörnin nota húmor og virknikosti útileiksvæðisins til að hefja og viðhalda samskiptum innan jafningjahópsins, og til að byggja upp tilfinninguna að tilheyra innan barnahópsins. Í þriðju greininni var félagslyndi yngstu leikskólabarnanna sérstaklega skoðað út frá því hvernig þau nota áhorf og eftirhermu til að taka þátt í leik og samskiptum í jafningjahópnum. Niðurstöðurnar varpa ljósi á virka þátttöku ungra barna í mótun félagslegra tengsla og jafningjamenningar og bæta við þá þekkingu sem er til staðar á félagslegri reynslu yngstu barna leikskólans. Doktorsrannsóknin er framlag til þekkingarsköpunar á sviði leikskólafræði og veitir einstaka og dýrmæta innsýn í nýtt og vaxandi rannsóknarsvið um félagslega virkni ungra leikskólabarna, þar sem áhersla er lögð á virka þátttöku þeirra í jafningjasamskiptum og hæfni þeirra til að móta félagsleg tengsl, jafnvel með lágmarks milligöngu fullorðinna.

Gögnum var safnað yfir níu mánaða tímabil með þátttökuathugunum þar sem notast var við myndbandsupptökur og vettvangsnótur sem meginrannsóknaraðferðir til að skoða óyrt félagsleg samskipti ungra leikskólabarna. Samskiptin voru afrituð samkvæmt viðurkenndum viðmiðum fjölháttasamtalsgreiningar og sýna niðurstöðurnar mikilvægi hennar sem aðferðafræði í rannsóknum með ungum börnum. Fjölháttasamtalsgreining getur gefið okkur djúpa og blæbrigðaríka innsýn í þær óyrtu aðferðir sem ung börn beita í félagslegum samskiptum. Félagsháttafræði og fjölháttasamtalsgreining geta því veitt traustan fræðilegan og aðferðafræðilegan ramma fyrir rannsóknir eins og þessa og niðurstöðurnar stuðla að nýstárlegri sýn á félagslyndi, félagslega virkni og hæfni yngstu leikskólabarnanna.

Niðurstöður þessarar doktorsrannsóknar hafa bæði stefnumótandi og hagnýtt gildi fyrir leikskólastarf þar sem þær vekja athygli á mikilvægi þess að styðja við dýpri og fjölbreyttari skilningi á félagslegri virkni ungra leikskólabarna og mikilvægi þess að styðja við félagsleg samskipti þeirra í jafningjahópnum. Niðurstöðurnar hafa einnig hagnýtt gildi fyrir leikskólakennara þótt hlutverk kennara hafi ekki verið rannsakað sérstaklega í þessari rannsókn. Aukinn skilningur kennara á mikilvægi félagslegra samskipta fyrir ung leikskólabörn og hversu getumikil þau eru í þessum samskiptum, getur haft þau áhrif að kennarar styðji betur við þessi samskipti á faglegan og ígrundaðan hátt sem gefur ungum leikskólabörnum svigrúm og tækifæri til að mynda hið „sameiginlega við“ með jafningjum sínum og fóstra þannig enn betur félagslyndi sitt.

Lykilorð:

Yngstu börn leikskólans; félagslyndi; óyrt samskipti; fjölháttasamtalsgreining; jafningjahópurinn

Abstract

This PhD research project explores toddlers' sociality and competence within peer interactions, focusing on their use of embodied strategies to actively participate and co-construct their peer group, create a sense of togetherness and form a 'mutual we'. The research project was conducted in a toddler room in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting in Iceland and is an ethnomethodological (EM) study applying multimodal conversation analysis (CA) to examine these embodied strategies. The research offers an original contribution by challenging traditional views of toddlers as passive onlookers, demonstrating their active engagement and sophisticated social behaviours.

The research project is structured around three sub-studies, each presented in a research article. The first article investigates the embodied strategies toddlers use to initiate interactions with their peers, highlighting the importance of gaze and touch as initiation strategies. The second article explores how toddlers use humour and environmental resources to initiate and sustain interactions within the peer group. The third article examines how toddlers use observation and imitation as a pre-opening in the co-construction of peer interactions. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on toddler social experiences within ECEC settings. The findings highlight their agency in shaping social relationships and peer culture. Overall, this thesis provides unique and valuable insights into the new and emerging area of *toddler sociality*, emphasising their active role in peer interactions and their ability to co-construct social relationships independent of adult interactional interventions.

The data was collected over a 9-month period using participant observations through video recordings and field notes as the methods used. The interactions observed were transcribed according to recognised multimodal CA transcription conventions. The findings of this research underscore the value of multimodal CA as a methodological approach for studying toddlers' interactions, providing detailed and nuanced insights into the embodied strategies toddlers use to navigate their social worlds. Ethnomethodology and multimodal conversation analysis therefore provide a robust theoretical and methodological framework for conducting this type of research and the findings of this study contribute to an original way of conceptualising toddler sociality and toddler social competence in ECEC.

The findings have implications for policy and practice in early childhood education, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of toddler sociality and the importance of supporting peer interactions in ECEC settings. The findings also offer practical implications for early childhood teachers. Even though this study did not examine the

role of the teachers in toddler peer interactions, by understanding the importance of embodied interactions and the sophisticated ways toddlers engage with their peers, it is my belief that teachers can better support and enhance toddler sociality and peer interactions by providing specific care and education in ECEC settings that offer support and opportunities for toddlers to interact and build a 'mutual we' with their peers.

Keywords:

Toddlers; sociality; multimodal conversation analysis; peer group; embodied interactions

Acknowledgements

When I started this PhD research project at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand in November of 2014, I did not think I would still be working on it almost 11 years later. But here I finally am, finishing the PhD. I would not be here without the support and guidance of my PhD supervisors and doctoral committee, Amanda Bateman, Sally Peters, and Hrönn Pálmadóttir. I would like to thank the three of you sincerely. Mandy, thank you for all of your encouragement and passion for my research, your believe that it was worth pursuing and finishing when things were tough, and for introducing me to the fantastic CA community that I hope to be a member of for the rest of my career. Sally, thank you for helping me begin this journey through the WMIER doctoral scholarship at Waikato and welcoming me to New Zealand, and for all of your feedback and assistance throughout writing this dissertation. I would also like to thank the two of you for sticking with me as I transferred to the University of Iceland and not giving up on me as time stretched on. Hrönn, your support has been invaluable to me, and I would like to thank you so much for joining the committee after I transferred to Iceland, adding your expertise on the youngest children to the mix. You have also been an excellent mentor for me as a new University teacher, and I will keep all of your advice and recommendations with me as I move forward in my teaching and researching career.

This PhD research project would not have been possible without my young participants. They have been my main motivation throughout. I therefore want to thank them, their parents and their teachers for allowing me to spend all this time with them. I feel very privileged to know you and your competent ways of interacting with your peers.

I would like to thank my colleagues for their support throughout the years. My colleagues at the ECEC setting where I worked, thank you for your understanding and willingness to assist me and step in when I needed to be away because of schoolwork. Thank you for letting me talk about my research project and practice presenting my findings as a fledgling academic. To my colleagues at the School of Education, thank you for all the chats and discussions, formal and unformal, all the international trips to conferences and time spent commiserating as fellow PhD students or new and seasoned academics. I especially want to thank Anna Gréta, Auður, Friðborg and Sara Margrét. I've learned a lot from following your journeys and it has been lovely having you around as a sound board for different ideas, frustrations and big and small victories along the way.

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thank you for being there and reminding me of what life is all about. I would also like to thank my best friends, Dóra and Martina, for our chats and meet-ups. It is easy to forget that life is not only about a PhD, but you have helped me remember that there are other things that are important as well.

Of course, I have to thank Emma. My cat. I probably would have gone mad without a cat on my lap during all the late nights and long days sat at my desk. A purring cat is truly the best medicine.

Finally, I want to dedicate this thesis to my loved ones who passed away way to young. My brother, Veddi, the smartest person I have ever known. Your curiosity and questions were an inspiration throughout my life. I will always cherish our discussions on history, politics, and cats. Thank you for taking care of Emma and giving her a good home while I travelled the world and lived my dream. My sister-in-law, Anna Guðrún, who showed me that you can go after your dreams, and you can have lofty goals. I know that the two of you are watching and celebrating with me.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

ECEC	Early childhood education and care
EM	Ethnomethodology
CA	Conversation analysis
EMCA	Ethnomethodological conversation analysis
UNCRC	United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Original Papers

This thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals (I, II, III):

I. Gunnarsdóttir, B. and Bateman, A. (2022). Initiating interactions in the toddler peer group: Embodied conversation starters. *Research on Children and Social Interactions, 6*(1), 5-29. https://doi.org/10.1558/rcsi.22739

II. Gunnarsdóttir, B. and Bateman, A. (2024). Moments of togetherness: Humour and playful interactions in the toddler peer group. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2024.2404109

III. Gunnarsdóttir, B., Pálmadóttir, H. and Bateman, A. (forthcoming). Observing and imitating as a pre-opening: Exploring toddler sociality in the peer group. "Submitted for publication".

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Declaration of Contribution

This declaration affirms that the thesis is my original work and has not been submitted for another degree or qualification. All sources, both published and unpublished, have been properly cited and acknowledged. I was the sole researcher conducting data collection, interacting with the participants and relevant gatekeepers, and I had the responsibility to keep the data secure throughout the period this PhD research has lasted. All the initial analysis was conducted by myself with support from my main supervisor. Although I also presented my analysis at different conferences and data sharing sessions, I take full responsibility for the analysis and conclusions drawn from the data.

The thesis is based on the findings that have been presented in three research articles that were co-authored by myself in collaboration with one or two of my committee members. As the first author of the articles, I contributed majority of the writing and analysis, with support and participation from my co-authors when needed. They helped me articulate some of the findings and go deeper into the analysis to truly see what was happening and how it was happening, but the analysis and conclusions drawn are my own. Although I did indeed write this thesis, I received important and valuable feedback from all three committee members that has helped me to develop my writing further, my understanding of the field of study and of my own findings. Ultimately though, this thesis is my own original work, and I take full responsibility for its content.

This PhD research was conducted with high ethical standards. All important and relevant ethical approvals were attained, and I have attempted to show full respect for my young participants from before data collection began and until I finished this thesis. The rights of children to have their voices heard and listened to are important to me and I have made every effort to listen to and respect my participant throughout this process.

1 Introduction

The aim of this PhD research project is to develop a deeper understanding of toddler sociality through examining their embodied social interactions with their peer group (18-36-month-old children) in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting in Iceland. Human sociality is a complex concept that is difficult to define (Levinson, 2006). In order to examine sociality, we must examine social interactions, as it is through such connections that humans construct shared understandings, engage in communication and participate in intersubjectivity, which are all integral aspects of sociality (Enfield & Levinson, 2006a). This also holds true for toddlers. Existing research has demonstrated that toddlers are competent social actors who actively seek peer interactions in ECEC settings, and they are adept at interpreting social cues and modifying their behaviour accordingly (e.g. Alcock, 2013; Bateman & Church, 2017; Eleni, 2025; Greve, 2008; Kidwell, 2005, Løkken, 2010; Pálmadóttir, 2017; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020). The interactions explored are predominantly embodied, occurring through gestures, gaze, facial expressions, vocalisation, touch and imitation. However, within the field of ECEC, further research is needed to understand how toddlers initiate these embodied interactions, the specific strategies they employ and how these interactions showcase their competence and their sociality.

Through examining these embodied interactions, we can uncover what toddler sociality looks like, since through social interactions, toddlers create a sense of togetherness or a 'mutual we' (Greve, 2005) within their peer group. Within the peer group 'togetherness' is crucial, although it is a difficult term to define (van Oers & Hännikäinen, 2001). In this thesis, togetherness is defined as 'a sense of belonging to a group' (Corsaro, 2005), being accepted by the group (Hännikäinen, 1998) and being a 'full member' (Goffman, 1984). For young children, being a full member means having friends to play with (Einarsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2020), which in Goffman's (1984) terms refers to someone who is accepted by the group and fully integrated, seen by others in the group as a legitimate member and someone who understands the groups´ norms and unwritten rules. In addition, the term 'mutual we' describes the observation of togetherness and joint attention within the toddler peer group where their eagerness to participate and interact with each other is obvious (Greve, 2005). These are indeed the foundations of toddler sociality.

First, it is important to explain the term 'toddler'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'toddler' as 'a young child beginning to walk', while 'to toddle' is described as a 'move with short unsteady steps while learning to walk'. In this thesis, the use of the word 'toddler' aligns with Gunvor Løkken (2010), who uses the term as a celebration of their

unique style of being. In Løkken's words, toddler peer relations are more "bodily joyful than toyful" (2010. p. 174), where joyful peer interactions focused more on the body rather than play materials. Although I have set a certain age range for when I consider children to be 'toddlers', I am more inclined to use the term as a social category (Rutanen, 2011) rather than a strict age description. Thus, while the study focuses on children at a particular age range, the emphasis remains on interactions typically found within toddlers' peer groups, but not exclusively so.

This ethnomethodological (EM) study uses multimodal conversation analysis (CA) to examine the embodied strategies toddlers use to initiate and sustain peer interactions. Multimodality as a term has different connotations across disciplines, but the definition used in this research is "the various resources mobilized by participants for organizing their action – such as gesture, gaze, facial expressions, body postures, body movements, and also prosody, lexis and grammar" (Mondada, 2016, p. 4). As toddler sociality is rooted in social interactions, a deep examination of how their embodied interactions and their sociality present themselves in a peer group within an ECEC setting can, therefore, provide valuable new insights into what sociality means in the context of the toddler social world.

This PhD project consists of three published sub-studies (Articles I-III). The first article investigates the embodied strategies toddlers use to initiate interactions with their peers. The second explores how toddlers use humour and environmental resources in incongruous ways to initiate and sustain interactions within the peer group. The third article explores how toddlers use observation and imitation as a pre-opening in peer interactions. Together, these findings build a detailed account of toddler sociality. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on toddler social experiences within ECEC, highlighting the significance of peer interactions in early childhood as a crucial aspect of their sociality. Additionally, it is my hope that the rigorous analysis that informs the findings will inform the professional development of early childhood teachers working with toddlers in the ECEC sector by raising awareness of toddler sociality and the social competences toddlers often display within their peer group.

1.1 My positionality as a researcher

To begin this exploration of toddler sociality, it is important to outline my positionality as the researcher, as it explains why I chose to conduct research with toddlers. First, I am an early childhood teacher. I have years of experience working in ECEC settings, both in my native Iceland as well as in Norway. In the last two decades, I have become fascinated with the way the youngest children in early childhood settings interact and just how close their relationships can become. The peer culture is important to preschool age children, as has been observed within the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2017), and it is also important to toddlers (e.g. Greve, 2005; Løkken, 2004). Through my experiences, I have repeatedly witnessed the competency of toddler social interactions and their meaningful

exchanges with their peers. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) has also influenced both my practice and my research interests, and I find it very thought-provoking to engage with the ideas of participation and children's rights in the context of infants and toddlers in ECEC. Examining the articles from the UNCRC with very young children in mind, grappling with the ideas of when children are 'able' to express their rights and how to honour these rights (Alderson & Yoshida, 2020) is personally captivating.

During my master's research, I developed a fascination with poststructuralist thought, particularly Michel Foucault's writings on power relations (1977), which I explored in my master's thesis *Listening to young children: power and agency in a Maltese reception class* (Gunnarsdóttir, 2012). Poststructuralists generally argue that critical reflection is essential for enhancing our understanding of how and why things are the way they are (MacNaughton, 2005). Earlier engagement with these theories has significantly influenced my academic interest, driving my curiosity about how toddlers make sense of the world through social interactions with their peers. From my experience, I have observed toddlers' willingness and competence in social interactions through both casual and pedagogical observations of peer groups in my practice. However, these observations often seem at odds with common perceptions of toddler social behaviour, which is frequently characterised by phrases such as 'the terrible twos' and 'temper tantrum'. This discrepancy is one of the key motivations behind my research in this field. This PhD research project is not, however, a poststructuralist study. I have chosen to use the research approaches of ethnomethodology and multimodal conversation analysis, which can provide valuable tools for uncovering what is meaningful to children by observing their everyday interactions. Through transcribing the interactions in a rigorous, systematic way with multimodal CA transcription conventions, the detailed, sequential manner of the interaction and what is important to those interacting becomes visible (Bateman, 2025).

Connected to my stance as a researcher in childhood studies focusing on young children's competencies as social actors, I have become more reflective on how I conduct my research, how I write about it and how I wish to present it. I feel myself increasingly using the concept *reflexivity* to explain my role as a researcher. *Reflexivity* can be defined as the "continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality" (Berger, 2015, p. 220) as well as being aware of the fact that the researcher will always have an effect on both the process and the outcome of the research they are conducting. I kept this in mind throughout the data collection period as I sometimes struggled to find the observer role that best matched my ethical values. This was probably also connected to the fact that I was very familiar with the setting on both a personal and professional level and worked in a different room in the setting during and after the data collection period. However, I do feel that through *reflexivity*, I managed to conduct my research ethically and within the values embedded in the UNCRC. Finally, I believe that my academic research interests coupled with my *reflexivity* and ethical stance as an ECEC

teacher have provided a strong foundation for my study, and it has been a pleasure to explore in depth the social world of toddlers. I have now provided the reasoning for why I have chosen to do research with toddlers and will now discuss why this is an important research project which can be of value to the field of ECEC and multimodal conversation analysis as a whole.

1.2 Rationale for the study

In Iceland, as in many countries, toddlers spend their lives both at home and in early childhood settings. International research on toddlers' social lives in ECEC settings indicate that high-quality ECEC can have significant social, developmental, economic, and academic benefits (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Gadima et al., 2020; OECD, 2025; Scmutz, 2024; Sylva et al., 2006). Studies have also examined how toddlers interact within these settings, how they influence their environments, and how they make use of it for their own benefit (e.g. Bae, 1996; Corsaro, 2003, 2017; Denzin, 2010; Edwards et al., 1993; Ekström & Cekaite, 2020; Greve & Solheim, 2010; Kidwell, 2005; Pálmadóttir, 2017; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020; Ryan, 2005). These studies suggest that toddlers are highly attuned to social cues and adept at responding appropriately in order to interact with their peers.

The ECEC sector for children under the age of two has rapidly expanded in Iceland over the past decades and is expected to grow even more in the coming years. In 2003, 89% of two-year-old children and 24% of one-year-old children attended ECEC settings (Statistic Iceland, 2004). In contrast, in 2023, over 90% of children aged two attended ECEC in Iceland, and just over 44% of one-year olds (Statistic Iceland, 2024). However, attendance varies significantly by region, with 77% of one year old children attending ECEC in the Westfjords district and only 10% in the Sudurnes district (Statistics Iceland, 2024). Many municipalities have ambitious plans to expand ECEC provisions to accommodate younger children as parental leave (currently 12 months) ends. This increasing presence of very young children in ECEC highlights the need for research into their experiences, interactions and engagement within the peer group to provide detailed insight into how they engage in these contexts.

This study adopts a rigorous multimodal conversation analysis approach, seeking to provide original insights into toddler peer relationships in ECEC, as well as an exploration of toddler sociality. The application of multimodal conversation analysis allows for a data-driven exploration of what is important to toddlers through examining their everyday peer interactions (Bateman, 2011; Danby, 2021). Furthermore, the detailed analysis prompts findings that contribute to the international discourse on toddler social experiences by offering empirical insight that can inform policy and practice in the international field of early childhood education and care. As the number of toddlers in ECEC in Iceland continues to grow, it is important to understand what they appear to value in their daily experiences. This knowledge can help teachers, guided by their settings' pedagogical

philosophy, to better support toddlers' social development and create positive, meaningful experiences in ECEC, thereby supporting their sociality.

1.3 Description of the three articles

Article I, *Initiating interactions in the toddler peer group: Embodied conversation starters*, examines how toddlers use gaze and touch to initiate peer interactions. Video recordings captured daily activities in a toddler room within an ECEC setting. The detailed multimodal conversation analysis, through CA's method of 'unmotivated looking' revealed that the participating toddlers adeptly read complex social cues and adjusted their behaviour accordingly, often through trial and error. The interactions were of varying lengths, sometimes lasting a few seconds and sometimes several minutes, where the toddler participants revealed the competent ways in which they used embodied strategies to initiate interactions, showcasing their willingness to interact with others through repeated attempts. The findings also underscore that these short interactions seemed to be important for small moments of togetherness (Hännikäinen, 1998), or having a sense of belonging to a group of peers. The findings from this article formed the basis for subsequent articles, laying down the emerging theme of what I am terming 'toddler sociality'.

Article II, *Moments of togetherness: Humour and playful interactions in the toddler peer group*, focuses on interactions in the outdoor play area, building on the findings from Article I, which demonstrated that even social interactions of shorter lengths were significant to toddlers and their sense of togetherness. Further analysis of the data made the toddlers' interest to interact with their peers visible, again showcasing their sociality, as they used humour and playful interactions to create small moments of togetherness with their peers. Significantly, the findings indicate that toddlers demonstrated 'incongruity' through their humorous use of different environmental resources in incongruous and social ways. They showed competence at incorporating different embodied strategies, such as humour and vocalisation, to create a 'mutual we' (Greve, 2005), and a sense of togetherness through joint attention within their peer group.

Article III, *Observing and imitating as a pre-opening: Exploring toddler sociality in the peer group,* examines how the participating toddlers showed interest in an ongoing play activity or participation framework (C. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004), with their peers, and how through their use of observing and imitating, they were attempting embodied participation in the play of their peers. The findings of Articles I and II indicate that gaze and imitation were crucial embodied strategies used in the toddler peer group, whereas Article III builds on them by showcasing that with the use of these embodied strategies, the toddlers demonstrated their sociality through making visible their understanding of what was going on and how to act within the ongoing participation framework. They did this through actively participating in the play activities of their peers through observation

and imitation. The three articles combined add unique knowledge and contribution to the growing field of toddler social interactions and the exploration of toddler sociality.

1.4 Structure of the thesis and main research question

This thesis consists of seven chapters, beginning with an introduction to the research project and its aims and objectives. The overall research question: *How do toddlers initiate and participate in interactions within their peer group?* is also presented. In Chapter 2, I introduce the *research context* and in Chapter 3, the *theoretical and methodological framework* of the thesis is critically reviewed. Chapter 4 examines the *previous research* conducted in the field and the research gaps that this project aims to address.

In Chapter 5, the *methods* of the project are described in detail, including the field of study, the participants, the data collection methods used, ethical considerations and data analysis. Chapter 6 summarises the *findings* of the three articles as they were presented in the published articles accompanying this thesis, and in Chapter 7, the findings are *discussed* in detail with the overall research question in mind and final conclusions are drawn. The main research question as well as the three sub-questions, which were put forward in the three articles in order to explore the issue of toddler sociality through embodied interactions in the toddler peer group, guided this thesis. The three articles can be found at the end of this thesis.

2 Research context

When conducting research in education, it is important to understand the social and cultural context where the research is conducted as well as the background issues that impact the practice in the schools and ECEC settings (e.g. Hammersley, 2013; Qvortrup, 2005). In this chapter, the Icelandic ECEC system is reviewed, showing how it has developed in the last several decades. In addition, Chapter 2 details the impact the more recent implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) has had on ECEC settings in Iceland. I also examine the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines and how these relate to the toddler age group.

2.1 The Icelandic context

The ECEC sector in Iceland can trace its origins to the early twentieth century, being mainly 'day-care-homes' for children from poor families run by a women's charity. Later, part-time settings ('playschools'), also run by the charity, opened for all children; these playschools were thought of as a support for children's upbringing (Jónasson, 2006). Most of the children in the 'day-care-homes' were from poor and single parent families, while the children attending playschools were from families with a higher socioeconomic status (Einarsdóttir, 2007a). For about 40 years, this charity ran these part-time and full-time settings for children as well as offering education for 'young girls' to work in the ECEC sector (Jónasson, 2006).

In 1973, the Ministry of Education took over all responsibility for the ECEC sector and the first act on daycare stated, for example, that the purpose of the ECEC sector was to provide children with the opportunity to 'be cared for by pedagogues in an environment that enhances their personal and social development' (Lög um byggingu og rekstur dagvistunarheimilda nr.29/1973, p. 1). This same year, the Ministry of Education also took over the training of staff for the ECEC sector. The Foster School of Iceland was established, and it delivered education for people interested in working with children from birth to seven years of age (Lög um Fósturskóla Íslands nr.10/1973). This college replaced the older college that educated ECEC nurses and had been established in 1946. In 1976, municipal authorities took over the responsibility of establishing, running and licencing ECEC settings while the Ministry retained responsibility over pedagogical matters and education of staff (Einarsdóttir & Tryggvadóttir, 1996).

The 1980s and 90s were periods of significant changes in the ECEC sector in Iceland. In 1985, a national pedagogical framework plan, mandated by a 1981 Act, was published by the Ministry of Education (Lög um dagvistarheimili fyrir börn nr. 40/1981). The framework plan was a significant milestone, as for the first time in Iceland, the educational

value of ECEC was recognised as was the importance of quality care and education for young children. In 1991, another significant milestone was reached. The starting age for compulsory education was lowered from seven to six years of age, and ECEC settings were mandated to provide education and care for all children from birth to six years of age. These were also called 'playschools' (the term 'day-care-homes' was abandoned) and were described as settings where children receive 'upbringing and education' in 'quality care and safe upbringing conditions' (Lög um leikskóla nr.48/1991, p.1). In 1994, a further step was taken, and the playschools were proclaimed to be the *first level of schooling in Iceland* (Lög um leikskóla nr. 78/1994), while still maintaining the play-based, holistic development pedagogy.

Another noteworthy development within the ECEC sector were the changes made in the education of ECEC staff. As mentioned above, in 1973, the Ministry of Education took over the responsibility of training people for the ECEC sector. It required a three-year post-secondary school qualification, giving graduates the right to call themselves ECEC carers (Lög um Fósturskóla Íslands nr. 10/1973). In 1997, the Foster School merged with the Teacher's College of Iceland, resulting in ECEC carers now being educated at tertiary level, and in 1998, the first 'playschool teachers' graduated with a B.Ed. degree in early childhood education and care (Jónasson, 2006). The education of teachers has further developed, and in 2008, Iceland was one of the first nations in the world to require 'playschool' teachers (as well as primary school teachers) to hold a master's degree (Lög um leikskóla nr. 87/2008). This change coincided with the amalgamation of the Teacher's College and the University of Iceland.

2.2 The Icelandic ECEC national curriculum guidelines

In 1999, national curriculum guidelines, based to some extent on the previous framework plan, were published. It was mandated in the statute that all ECEC settings must use these guidelines as well as create their own local curriculum reflecting the pedagogy and culture of individual settings (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1999). The guidelines were play-based and emphasised the holistic development of the child. Learning as a goal or an objective was not stressed (Einarsdóttir, 2010). In the pedagogy represented in the 1999 guidelines, the influences of social constructivism and the work of the American progressive educator John Dewey (1859-1952) are at the forefront (Einarsdóttir, 2010).

According to Dewey, the child constructs new knowledge through previous knowledge, experience and development. It is important to nurture the child's natural inclination to learn and explore, and it is only through experiences that are relevant to the child, which they can relate to earlier experiences, that the child can learn. Dewey warned that 'mis-educative' experiences do not offer children learning experiences because they offer irrelevant information that the child has no means to understand (Dewey, [1938]1997, [1916]2011). Dewey also warned against making preparation the goal of ECEC or early

schooling, proposing that "when preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted" (Dewey, [1938]1997, p. 49). These ideas can clearly be seen in the national curriculum guidelines (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1999) where the importance of active learning through building on previous experiences of children is stressed.

Early childhood education and care in the Nordic countries emphasises social development, democracy and individual expression (Broström & Wagner, 2003). Academic preparation is not a goal and school-readiness is usually not emphasised. A study on values in Nordic curricula documents (Einarsdóttir et al., 2014), identifies the three main values they all have in common: democracy, care and competence. Democracy is a fundamental value that children experience first-hand daily, but it is also considered important for children to become democratic citizens in the future. It, therefore, encompasses both a being and a becoming for the child. Another fundamental value is care, which relates not only to the basic care of the individual child but also to relationships based on care, empathy and ethics. The third main value, identified in Einarsdóttir et al.'s (2014) study, is competence, especially as it relates to social interactions. All the Nordic curricula emphasise social competence and these are open and flexible documents portraying children as competent, active and co-constructers of their own lives (Einarsdóttir et al., 2014).

It is interesting to note that even though Iceland follows the Nordic tradition in ECEC for the most part, with play, democracy, and outside learning being highly valued, the curriculum in Iceland has not been as influenced by the teachings of Fröbel, as is the case in the other Nordic countries (Einarsdóttir et al., 2014). As I have mentioned above, the Icelandic ECEC curriculum is highly influenced by John Dewey although this is not stated explicitly in the document. Jóhanna Einarsdóttir (2010) conducted research where she examined all Icelandic school curricula and found that over half of them explicitly mention Dewey's philosophy as their pedagogical foundation. One of the reasons for this may be that one of the authors of the first national ECEC framework plan from 1985 (Ministry of Education, 1985), Valborg Sigurðardóttir (1922-2012), was educated in the US. She was also the first principal of the initial school that trained ECEC staff in Iceland and the first dean of the Foster School of Iceland. Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir (2004) interviewed Valborg about her pioneering work in the ECEC field in Iceland, and in it she stated that John Dewey's progressivism was highly influential throughout her education in psychology at the time, and that she herself looked towards the Bank Street preschool in New York (Einarsdóttir, 2004). In the national framework plan from 1985 (Ministry of Education, 1985), there is also a strong emphasis on the theories of Jean Piaget and Eric Ericson. Fröbel is barely mentioned.

In 2011, new national ECEC curriculum guidelines were published in Iceland. These guidelines are still in line with the pedagogical focus of the previous guidelines; however,

one significant difference is that they place greater emphasis on life-long learning. In fact, the guidelines are a joint curriculum for three school levels in Iceland: ECEC, compulsory education in primary and middle schools (6-16 years of age) and upper secondary schools (16-19 years of age). The first three chapters of the curriculum are shared, stressing the importance of providing children with 'consistency and continuity in education from preschool to university and adult education' (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 10). The ECEC chapters build on the shared chapters and the previous curriculum guidelines, highlighting holistic development, linking care with education and emphasising creativity and democratic practice. Play should be at the centre of children's experiences in ECEC settings, as 'play is inseparable from childhood and therefore the focus of all preschool activity' (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 37). In 2023, several chapters of the national curriculum guide were revised, and an increased emphasis was given to free, self-guided play. In addition, the play and interaction style of toddlers was addressed, the role of teachers and staff as it involves supporting play, and a chapter on the integration of the different learning areas and assessment methods were added (Ministry of Education and Children, 2023).

2.3 Toddlers and the national curriculum guidelines

Neither the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines from 1999 or 2011 contain any direct mention of infants or toddlers. The guidelines encourage teachers to evaluate children's learning throughout in order to be able to provide them with "appropriate study opportunities and encouragement" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 46). The general tone of the framework is to be respectful of children's natural inclinations to play, move and inquire, where the role of the teacher is to support those inclinations while also providing children with care and support. However, in the partially revised curriculum framework from 2023, for the first time in official documents regarding ECEC in Iceland, toddlers are mentioned specifically. The curriculum emphasises that the 'youngest children in ECEC settings' (the term used for one- to three-year-old children in Iceland) use corporeal and embodied ways to play and interact with their peers and that their joint meaning making takes place through their use of the body (Ministry of Education and Children, 2023).

When examining other national curriculum frameworks, especially in relation to how toddlers are discussed within such documents, *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand national ECEC curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), is an excellent example of how a curriculum framework can construct ECEC work with infants and toddlers. In *Te Whāriki,* toddlers are viewed as competent and capable learners and the importance of care for their development and learning is emphasised. In fact, by recognising the central role of care for young children's learning, *Te Whāriki* posed a challenge to the traditional models of curriculum that often ignore infants and toddlers altogether (White & Mika, 2013). The fact that *Te Whāriki* positions infants and toddlers alongside older children, as well as the fact that development is described more like a spiral rather than in age-

related stages, makes "a strong statement about the inclusion of "babies" in the educational system, and about the nature of teaching and learning" (White & Mika, 2013, p. 96).

Te Whāriki can be said to have led the way for infant and toddler pedagogy and in recent years, there has been an increased call for specialised education for ECEC teachers who want to work with the youngest age group (Gilken et al., 2023; Page, 2017; Recchia & Fincham, 2019). Previously, it has been argued that putting an emphasis on the difference between infants and toddlers and older children within ECEC may remove the focus from their competencies and in fact make them appear more vulnerable and different from the older children; it may turn them into the 'other' (Salamon, 2011). One can, however, also argue that ignoring the differences between younger children and older children can imply that the pedagogical work of teachers and staff look the same regardless of the child's age. This, I believe, can be detrimental to supporting interactions and play in the peer group of toddlers, which previous research has also shown is a crucial factor in fostering emotionally responsive relationships between young children and their teacher as well as between young children and their peers (Pursi, 2019, 2022; Quinones & Pursi, 2020). Indeed, my hope is that this thesis will add to the growing field of knowledge regarding the importance of teachers and educators understanding how toddlers interact and participate in interactions and play with their peers. Intertwining this knowledge with the rights of the child to be heard and listened to, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), can, therefore, hopefully help make the case for a more nuanced pedagogical approach in the toddler room in ECEC settings. Let us now turn to the impact the UNCRC has had on the ECEC system in Iceland and why it is of interest to this current research project.

2.4 The UNCRC

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an important theme within the Icelandic context. The UNCRC was ratified in Iceland in 1992 and implemented in national law in 2013 (Lög um samning Sameinuðu þjóðanna um réttindi barnsins nr. 19/2013). The current policy from the Ministry of Education and Children is to implement the UNCRC in all schools and after-school activities in Iceland by 2030, according to the *Act on the Integration of Services for the Benefit of Children's Success* (Lög um samþættingu þjónustu í þágu farsældar barna nr. 86/2021).

Connected to this new law, there has been a push to implement the UNCRC in ECEC settings through the Rights Respecting School project by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) (*UNICEF*, n.d.). The main focus of this approach has been on participation, often focusing on Article 12, which states that children 'who are capable of forming their own views' have the right to express their views, according to their age and maturity (*UNCRC*, 1989). The argument is that listening to children's views and taking their perspectives seriously into account, is the basis of participation. Laura Lundy's

(2007) model proposing a way to implement Article 12 has been very influential in Iceland. In the model, there are four principles that need to be addressed for Article 12 to be implemented.

> Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express their views.
> Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.
> Audience: The views must be listened to.
> Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.
>
> (Lundy, 2007, p.933).

But what does this look like for toddlers (18-36 months old)? In *General Comment No.12* (United Nations, 2009), it is stated clearly that parties to the UNCRC "should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity" (p. 9). It further states,

> research shows that the child is able to form views from the youngest age, even when she or he may be unable to express them verbally. Consequently, full implementation of Article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication … through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices, and preferences" (p. 9).

These conditions clearly need to be met for Article 12 to be implemented. However, the way teachers and staff realise it in the toddler room varies. Often, participation is linked to "self-determination and individual choice" (Bae, 2010, p. 213), which often positions toddlers as not 'mature' enough to participate in traditional 'democratic' practices, such as choice-time, small elections and verbal expressions of opinions (Bae, 2010). Instead, we might look at the relational and cooperative aspects of participation that occur in social interactions and play, which is connected with the collaborative aspects of participation that take place through various non-verbal cues and embodied gestures toddlers use to signal their involvement and contribute to the ongoing interaction (Bae, 2009, 2010). Further research in the field also suggests that we need to first position toddlers as 'knowers' and provide them with "opportunities to participate in knowledge-sharing and knowledge-constructing interactions" (Degotardi & Han, 2022, p.105). Interactions are therefore at the forefront of participation as it is through the partnership of interactions that knowledge is constructed and shared (Degotardi & Han, 2022). Degotardi and Han (2022) are referring to interaction between the teacher and the child. These interactions are what Bae (2012) refers to as 'spacious interactional patterns', where a teacher is open to questions from the child, asks open ended questions and takes all of the interactive strategies the child uses into account (Bae, 2012). The findings of this PhD study speak directly to this suggestion of a partnership, even though the teacher-toddler relationship is not what is being examined. This research does however

contribute unique and detailed findings to the knowledge base of the relational, interactional, and co-operative aspects of participation within the toddler peer group, as well as within ECEC settings as a whole, which can be of benefit to teachers interested in affording young children the opportunities to truly express their views and to position toddlers as 'knowers' and capable participants within ECEC.

2.5 Summary

Chapter 2 has provided an overview of the development of the ECEC system in Iceland, highlighting some of the significant milestones that have been crucial to the professionalisation of the sector. The impact of the UNCRC on Icelandic ECEC settings and the emphases on the importance of children's participation and the recognition of non-verbal communication in early childhood has also been explored. In the revised national curriculum framework from 2023, toddlers are mentioned specifically for the first time, stressing the fact that the unique needs of infants and toddlers in ECEC settings is being recognised in Iceland, which is a huge step in the right direction towards providing high quality education and care for infants and toddlers. Our focus will now turn to an examination of the theoretical and methodological framework of this PhD research project.

3 Theoretical and methodological framework

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to explain the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis. The overall aim of the study is to contribute new knowledge on toddler sociality and the competent ways toddlers interact through embodied means. In addition, this research showcases multimodal conversation analysis as a useful approach when conducting research with toddlers in ECEC settings. The contribution of the study is, therefore, both empirical and methodological. The four elements of the research process can be seen in Figure 1 and are further explained below.

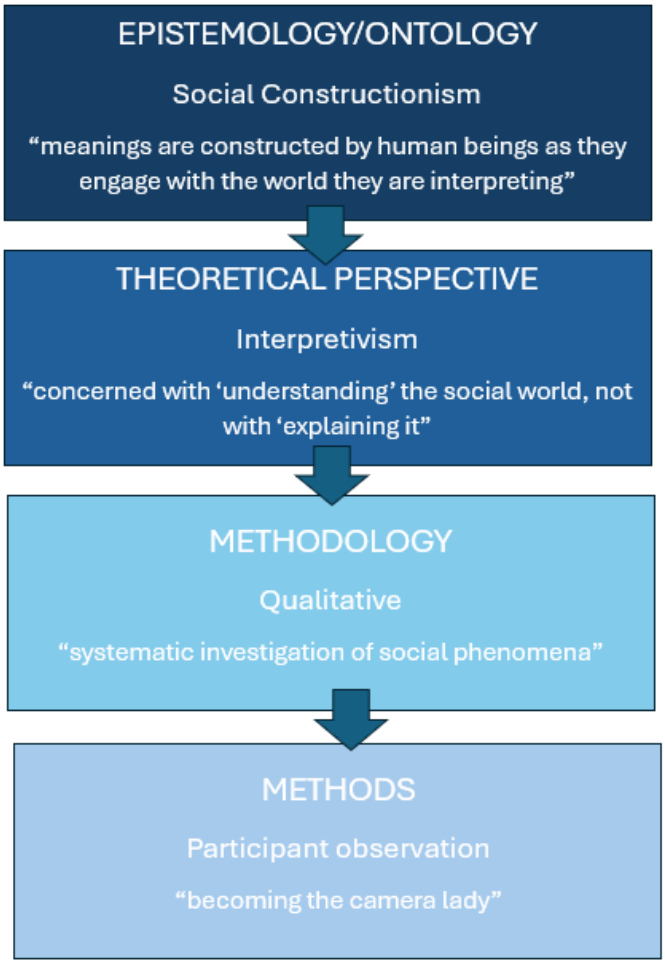

Figure 1. Elements of the research process. Inspired by Crotty, 1998, p. 4.

The ontological and epistemological underpinning of this research project is social constructionism, which holds that

> all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Because the view that meaning is constructed through engaging with the world informs the basis of this research project, it logically follows that the theoretical perspective or research paradigm, is interpretivism. This approach argues that social reality is constructed by individuals through interactions with others; in other words, it "*looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world*" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). As such, interpretivism is concerned with 'understanding' the social world, not with 'explaining' it. This is a paradigm that connects clearly with ethnomethodology, the theoretical framework of the research project, which is concerned with describing interactions rather than explaining or evaluating them (Heritage, 1984). It also follows that the methodology of such a research project is a qualitative approach, where the emphasis is on a "systematic investigation of social phenomena and human behaviour and interaction" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 4). Through qualitative research, we look at the social world of a particular group of people, and how they construct their experiences and social relationships (Greig et al., 2013).

This research project lies within the field of childhood studies, which draws heavily on the perspective of social constructionism, arguing that reality and meaning are constructed through social processes (including interactions) and "different people construct meaning in different ways" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). The study examines how toddlers construct their shared social world as a peer group through embodied interactions within a specific socio-cultural context - an ECEC setting in Iceland. As Hammersley (2013) notes, this focus on the social construction of reality is a key characteristic of the social constructionist approach. Within the broad approach of childhood studies, such as the sociology of childhood, children are seen as social actors who are capable and competent contributors to the social world in which they belong (Qvortrup, 2005). Through this view, childhood is seen as a social construct that is shaped by social, cultural and historical factors. This has led to an increased understanding of the importance of the social environment in children's lives (Einarsdóttir, 2022) as well as the importance of listening to children's voices regarding their experiences.

Childhood studies have been influenced by the UNCRC (1989) as seen in the importance placed on recognising children's agency and rights and looking at them as active participants in their own lives. There are different ways to define toddler 'agency' but in this research, it is defined as "toddlers' ability to make choices, influence their physical

and social environment and assert their presence in peer interactions" (Eleni, 20225, p. 2). Other critical childhood studies' scholars also highlight children's rights when it comes to practices in ECEC as well as in research (Dahlberg et al., 1999; James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 2015). Bodén (2021) claims that ethical research based on their rights and that take their perspective into consideration, is research *with* or *by* children, and not *on* children. The data collection and analysis in the present study were conducted using multimodal conversation analysis (CA). Multimodality, as defined in the introduction chapter, encompasses "the various resources mobilized by participants for organising their action" (Mondada, 2016, p. 4). As a method, multimodal CA is, therefore, well suited for research highlighting children's perspectives and for research *with* children, since examining their day-to-day interactions with both peers and adults showcases children's competencies and capabilities in their everyday lives (Bateman, 2025; Bateman & Church, 2017).

A review of ethnomethodology, the theoretical framework that informs this research project, follows. Ethnomethodology emerged as an approach within social constructionism that examines both *how* we construct our shared world and *what* we are constructing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). It is closely linked to conversation analysis (CA), a method of examining social interactions. In this research project, multimodal CA is used; therefore, the following review will also address this focus. Additionally, this chapter examines the sociology of childhood, which provides an essential backdrop to my role as a researcher working with young children and the view of the child that informs this study.

3.1 Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was developed by Harold Garfinkel (1967) in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s, drawing from sociology and phenomenology (Linstead, 2006). Although Garfinkel himself never offered a clear definition of ethnomethodology (Lynch, 2025), a proposed definition by Heritage (1984) is as follows:

> the study of a particular subject matter: the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves (p. 4).

Ethnomethodology provides an approach for examining "how [people] "do" social life" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 342); that is, how individuals construct and maintain their social worlds. In essence, it explores how people make sense of their social reality by organising their actions in ways that become meaningful to others (Attewell, 1974; Lynch, 2025). The focus is on the mundane; the everyday social interactions that are often taken for granted (Lynch, 2025) even though they are meaningful (Dowling, 2007) and integral to human sociality. In fact, examining human sociality inescapably means examining

interactions (Levinson, 2006). Interactions are how humans create shared understandings, communicate and engage in collective behaviours and intersubjectivity, which is at the core of sociality (Enfield & Levinson, 2006a). Through interactions, people find meaning within certain situational contexts, interpret and reformulate these meanings, and thereby co-construct the social world within which they find themselves (Dowling, 2007). Examining social interactions is, therefore, crucial in order to fully understand societal structures and human social life.

Ethnomethodology emerged as a resistance to the positivist thinking that was prevalent in sociology at the time. Garfinkel's doctoral advisor at Harvard University, Talcott Parsons, emphasised that scientific inquiry must be grounded in theoretical frameworks and that data cannot be understood without theoretical interpretation (Parson, as cited in Heritage, 1984). However, Garfinkel sought to examine how social experiences are structured and enacted by individuals in the here and now (Heritage, 1984), making ethnomethodology an inductive approach to inquiry. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, ethnomethodology focuses on analysing data to uncover insights that might otherwise be overlooked (Bateman, 2011).

Before ethnomethodology, sociology had little interest in studying ordinary talk and everyday interactions, as these were deemed unremarkable and 'non-investigable' (Heritage, 1984). Ethnomethodology, however, foregrounded the significance of conversations and social interactions in shaping shared social realties (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011) and revealing taken-for granted social norms (Lynch, 2025). The emphasis was placed on the process of the construction of the phenomena—rather than the phenomena itself—and making sense of those processes. For Garfinkel, examining and understanding language was not about 'cracking the code' to understand words and sentences, but to understand actions, which are always situated within a certain context. You, therefore, have to examine an utterance "against a background of who said it, where and when, what was being accomplished by saying it and in the light of what possible considerations and in virtue of what motives it was said" (Heritage, 1984, p. 139). Therefore, examining social interactions can never be treated independently from the context within which they take place.

A core principle of ethnomethodology is 'ethnomethodological indifference' – the idea that research should focus on describing interactions as they occur rather than evaluating their correctness or factuality (Heritage, 1984). The ethnomethodologist needs to be careful not to presume to know better than the people performing the action within the interaction (Lynch, 2025). This is particularly relevant when conducting research with toddlers where their interactions can often appear 'incorrect' simply because they display different social and cultural rules and strategies to adults, and it takes a knowledgeable adult to understand this. Using an EM-based framework for research with toddlers and their interactions with peer groups allows researchers to analyse toddler communications on their own terms, highlighting their competencies and strengths rather than perceived

inadequacies and weaknesses (Bateman, 2017, 2025; Cekaite et al., 2024; Keel, 2015; Kidwell, 2009; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020; Quinones et al., 2024).

3.2 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) was developed at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s as a reaction to the current quantitative focus on the study of human interactions. It developed in part from ethnomethodology, and its emphasis was on examining mundane, everyday actions of people. CA has recently been defined as "the study of social interaction" (Luke, 2025, p.42) and it requires a focus on how interactions occur and how they are structured, more specifically, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Luke, 2025; ten Have, 1999).

Harvey Sacks' research at the Center for the Scientific Study of Suicide in Los Angeles, California in 1963-64 marked the beginning of CA (ten Have, 1999). Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (1974) were the first to discuss the "systematic of the organization of turn-taking for conversation" (pp. 696-697), which they claimed was observable in any conversation. This organisation put forward four rules: 1) speakers take turns talking; 2) in general, one speaker talks at a time; 3) overlapping talk is common but short; and 4) speakers transition between turns quickly (Sacks et al., 1974). According to Sacks et al. (1974), turn-taking is a fundamental feature of conversation and interaction. Conversations are, therefore, built by sequences of talk with participants taking turns talking. The next turn is based on a shared understanding of what the previous turn was about, an intersubjective understanding, which can then be seen in the 'next-turn proof procedure' (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Conversation analysts make sure that the analysis of the talk-in-interaction is based on what the participants demonstrate as understood about the conversation and not what the analyst thinks is happening. In CA, the most important issue to be analysed and examined is how participants in a conversation make sense of any given utterance within a conversation (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008).

The basic theoretical assumptions that drive CA are that "(a) talk is action, (b) action is structurally organized, and (c) talk creates and maintains intersubjective reality" (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 535). Another important factor in CA is that it is an inductive approach to research (Luke, 2025), as is ethnomethodology. According to Sacks, "theory should be data-driven, rather than data being used to support theory" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 26). It encourages the researcher to examine the data to be analysed without preconceptions of what one might find; there is no hypothesis to be tested, or theory proven (Bateman, 2011; Luke, 2025; Sacks, 1989b). Although it can be argued that one can never be completely without preconceptions, keeping an open mind and being aware of your own pre-assumptions about what you want or hope to observe can be useful.

As has already been stated, CA is used for examining social interactions between two or more people, and the process and structure of interactions that co-produce social order through analysing turns at talk (Sacks et al., 1974). An important aspect of the CA method

is 'unmotivated looking', where the researcher looks for what it meaningful to the participants through an iterative process of watching or listening to the video or audio recordings of naturally occurring interactions. They are then analysed by identifying "recurrent distinct interactive practice" (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 534). CA is, therefore, engaged in analysing 'talk-in-interaction' and what is said in those interactions. In addition, researchers using CA not only examine the structure of interactions, but they are also interested in looking at how participants in those interactions respond in recipient-designed ways to their interlocutors' prior action, which is often tacit and implied (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). The context of the interaction is therefore important and should not be ignored (Luke, 2025).

As previously mentioned, turn-taking is a fundamental aspect of conversation (Sacks et al., 1974), and it is crucial not to overlook its embodied components. The use of overt, embodied strategies clearly signals to other participants in the interaction that you understand the ongoing interaction and can competently engage. This is particularly relevant in research examining toddler interactions, where embodied interactive strategies often serve as their primary means of participation. Examining these embodied interactions can be achieved through multimodal CA. The following section will examine the evolution of multimodal CA and describe what it can offer for research with toddlers.

3.2.1 Multimodal conversation analysis

Initially, CA researchers concentrated solely on spoken interactions. However, in recent years the focus has expanded to include non-verbal, or multimodal interactions, such as the subtleties of gaze, touch, gestures and tone of voice (e.g. Ekström & Cekaite, 2020; Filipi, 2009; Mondada, 2016). The evolution of multimodal CA has its roots in the emergence of video recordings as a means of data collection, pioneered by researchers such a Charles and Marjory Goodwin in 1980s, among others (Mondada, 2019). Using video recordings has made it possible to review multiple times the embodied features of interaction, giving the researcher an 'enhanced view' of the interaction (M.H. Goodwin & Cekaite, 2025). This is especially useful when studying the interactions of very young children who have not begun using spoken language as their main method of communication. Charles and Majorie Goodwin (1992, 2004) demonstrated through their work on *participation frameworks* that examining only spoken conversations is too narrow, as people utilise various forms of embodied 'actions-in-interactions' alongside verbal ones. Similarly, Mondada's (2007) research on turn-taking in conversations highlights the significant embodied strategies speakers employ, such as pointing, to facilitate mutual understanding of the conversation's flow and the roles of participants as 'non-current speaker', 'possible next speaker', 'incipient speaker' and 'current speaker'. Further research by Mondada (2016; 2018; 2019) emphasises the importance of including embodied actions, as well as other multimodal actions, when examining interactions.

As aforementioned, CA looks at the mundane, the everyday taken-for-granted interactions that often take place without special attention.. Within the context of early childhood and social interactions in the peer group of very young children, these are often subtle interactions that may not be noticed as easily as interactions between older children and adults. Previous research with young children has shed light on the importance of the peer group to toddlers (e.g. Corsaro & Molinari, 1990; Eleni, 2025; Løkken, 2010). Therefore, using the detailed methods of multimodal CA can attempt to make visible the 'unseen', the overlooked and the taken-for-granted practices that can both lead to greater understanding about what is happening in ECEC settings and in the peer group of young children (Dowling, 2007).

I will now introduce some of the key issues of CA research that can help us to understand what is happening in the toddler peer group and how toddlers are performing complicated reciprocal interactions even at such a young age as the participants in this study. Harvey Sacks (1989b) argues that mundane, everyday social interactions are indeed orderly and that through close observation of those interactions we can notice the unnoticeable, the subtle, that we "could not, by imagination, assert were there" (Sacks, 1989b, p. 25). He believed that children's interactions and activities should be taken seriously and were worthy of study in their own right and that their social interactions were also orderly and structured through their use of conversational strategies seen in adult talk (Garfinkel et al., 1982, as cited in Danby, 2021). In CA, the foundational issues being studied include *turn-taking*, *adjacency pairs* and *conversational repair* and their structured, sequential order (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Within multimodal CA, these matters can be observed through embodied actions as well, where young children will organise their turn-taking, pair certain interactional strategies with others and repair their actions as they establish intersubjectivity in their interactions with peers through embodied strategies (Ekström & Cekaite, 2020; Filipi, 2009; Kidwell, 2009; Mondada, 2016; Pálmadóttir, 2017; Pursi, 2019, 2022; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020; Ylikörkkö, 2023).

Turn-taking: Competent speakers must plan their own turn and predict when the other speaker's turn ends while they listen to what the other speaker is saying (Casillas et al., 2016; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Mondada, 2016). Children do indeed develop turn-taking skills as infants through interactions with their care takers, and although these turn-taking activities can appear simple (Casillas et al., 2016), detailed sequential analysis using a multimodal CA approach has shown that they are indeed complex and intricate (Burdelski & Morita, 2017; Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007).

Adjacency pairs: Sequential organisation is a major theme within CA research, where certain conversational utterances call for particular responses (ten Have, 1999). One of the main sequences that occurs is paired action, or 'adjacency' pairs, through which participants in a conversation show their understanding and analysis of the previous turn. A key adjacency pair occurs within openings of conversations, which is something Sacks (1995) studied extensively in his early research and discussed in his first lecture. This is

important to the present research, as one focus of the studies is how toddlers 'open up' interactions with their peers through embodied strategies and how they organise their turn-taking to competently co-produce adjacency pairs within their embodied interactions.

Common adjacency pairs are visible through greeting/return greeting (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). They are considered adjacency pairs because they 'should' be produced next to each other. When one is missing, there is a 'noticeable absence'; the expected response is not given, and a misunderstanding can arise. Adjacency pairs, therefore, form a framework for expectations within talk-in-interactions, that need to be learned and practiced by emerging speakers. Interestingly, adjacency pairs are also observed within 'action-in-interaction' (C. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004), where embodied interactive strategies such as gaze, facial expressions and touch form pairs in toddler interactions (Cekaite & Mondada, 2021a; Engdahl, 2011; Kidwell, 2005, 2009; Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007; Pálmadóttir, 2017).

Conversational repair: When misunderstanding occurs within talk-in-interaction, one can often see 'conversational repair', in which a 'trouble source' is fixed (ten Have, 1999). This repair can be accomplished by either the original speaker or the other party in the interaction, depending on which one of them orient to the possible mistake. In fact, conversational repair is important to intersubjectivity, in that repair is not necessarily about saying the right thing within the context of the interaction, but more that speakers are establishing a similar understanding and meaning of the interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). For toddlers, this intersubjectivity is often embodied and occurs through haptic and corporal interactions as children work to connect with their peers (Cekaite, 2015; Pálmadóttir, 2017).

3.3 EMCA and the sociology of childhood

As the above review of ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) has established, the main interest of EM is to observe social interactions in orderly ways to examine the social world. CA then extends this focus by examining the structure of talk-in-interactions, which often has been taken for granted as part of ordinary speech (Dowling, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). The combination of these two approaches is called EMCA. In the following section, I will now examine how EMCA and the sociology of childhood complement each other as a research framework that will give us a strong base to understand toddlers' sociality.

EMCA aligns closely with contemporary perspectives on childhood that positions children as competent and capable social actors. Recent perspectives within childhood studies emphasise that children actively construct their own social worlds in collaboration with peers (e.g. Cooper & Quinones, 2022; Corsaro, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 1993; Greve, 2005; James et al., 1998; Jans, 2004; Løkken, 2004; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Rinaldi, 2021; Ryker & van Krieken Robson, 2023; Watson, 1992).

Jens Qvortrup (1994) conceptualises childhood as a permanent social structure that is influenced by society while simultaneously co-constructed by children. While childhood is enduring, it is also dynamic and evolving as its members change. There is some criticism towards this perspective, however. Corsaro (2017), for example, critiques Qvortrup, arguing that children do not merely contribute to pre-existing cultures but actively produce their own peer cultures through *interpretive reproduction* (Corsaro, 1992). Corsaro's research highlights how children make sense of their experiences collectively, emphasising the importance of peer interactions in early childhood. In the following chapter, I will look closely at Corsaro's work on the peer group and the impact it has had on our understanding of childhood, as well as at studies on toddler peer culture in ECEC settings, which have expanded significantly in recent decades (Cooper & Quinones, 2022; Engdahl, 2012; Greve, 2005; Løkken, 2004; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023). This PhD research offers a unique insight into this growing body of work by further exploring toddler peer interactions through an EMCA lens. This perspective can enhance our understanding of toddler sociality and expand to the conceptualisation of the term within, and across, the fields of early childhood education and care, sociology of childhood and childhood studies.

Multimodal EMCA research focuses on the everyday, taken-for-granted interactions that occur within social groups, often revealing overlooked aspects of social life (Dowling, 2007). In early childhood settings, toddlers' social interactions can be subtle and easily missed. Previous research in the sociology of childhood has highlighted the significance of peer relationships for toddlers (Corsaro & Molinari, 1990; Eleni, 2025; Greve, 2005; Løkken, 2004; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). Multimodal EMCA provides a detailed methodological approach for analysing these interactions and looking at *how* they occur, emphasising description rather than assessment of the strategies children use to interact, thus viewing children's competence in action (Butler, 2008). This study aligns with the perspective of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (*UNCRC*, 1989), as well as with the perspective of the sociology of childhood, viewing young children as competent social actors. Within ECEC settings, toddlers use various communicative strategies to engage with peers and negotiate their social world (Corsaro, 2017). This use of strategies begins quite early, and very young children are adept at developing complex access strategies in order to gain entry into the peer group (Cromdal, 2001; Eleni, 2025; Kyratzis, 2004). Research has shown that young children can navigate complex social interactions, demonstrating an understanding of subtle communicative cues, such as gaze direction and facial expressions (Kidwell, 2009).

3.4 Summary

Chapter 3 has outlined the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this research project, which explores toddler sociality through examining embodied interactions in the toddler peer group within an ECEC setting in Iceland. Grounded in social constructionism and ethnomethodology, and guided by an interpretivist paradigm,

the study uses multimodal conversation analysis to investigate how toddlers co-construct their social worlds. The study also draws on the sociology of childhood, positioning toddlers as competent social actors and emphasises their agency, aligning with the principles of the UNCRC. This chapter reviewed the origins and applications of EMCA and highlighted the relevance of multimodal CA in capturing the nuanced, often overlooked, embodied interactions in the toddler peer group. By integrating EMCA with childhood studies, the research offers a robust framework for examining the toddler peer group and contributes both empirically and methodologically to the field. The following chapter will focus on previous research that has been conducted on toddler social interactions and their peer group.

4 Previous research

The study of toddler sociality is a relatively new area of research within ECEC, although several previous studies have examined the social world of toddlers in depth, focusing on their interactions with peers as well as with adults (e.g. Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2021; Greve, 2008; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Pursi, 2022; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020; Quinones et al., 2020, 2024; Quinones & Pursi, 2020; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023). The concept of human sociality in general is intricate and difficult to define; it encompasses the examination of deeply ingrained and highly structured human interactions that create observable actions, contributing to both context and social organisation (Levinson, 2006). Importantly, interactions are central to human sociality; they are the means through which humans develop shared understandings, communicate with each other and participate in collective behaviours and intersubjectivity, which are all fundamental aspects of sociality (Enfield & Levinson, 2006a). Therefore, examining social interactions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of human sociality in general, as well as of toddler sociality, which is of particular interest in this thesis. The original contribution of this PhD research project, in addition to the examination of the toddler peer group and the rich, intricate embodied social interactions that take place between toddler aged peers in ECEC settings, is the exploration of these interactions, as they lie at the core of 'toddler sociality'.

Chapter 4 will review some of the previous research that has been conducted on social interactions in the toddler peer group in ECEC settings. These studies have shed light on the importance of the peer group to very young children, where they have the opportunity to interact and co-construct relationships. In addition, the chapter will show the strategies children use to participate in play and be accepted by the peer group. To begin, I will briefly review some of the research that has been conducted on children's peer groups, in general. The work of William Corsaro will be at the forefront of this discussion as his research on preschool children's peer cultures has been highly influential within the field of childhood studies. I will then turn to a review of previous research conducted on the peer group of younger children. Next, the chapter will delve into the research that has explored the different embodied strategies that toddler-aged children often use to interact within their peer group and how those strategies showcase their sociality. Finally, possible research gaps and the intended contribution of this study will be examined.

4.1 The peer group

William Corsaro (1979a, 1992, 3005, 2017; Corsaro & Eder, 1990) is an American sociologist who has researched the peer group and the peer culture for decades. He

defines 'peer culture' as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197). According to Corsaro, children do not simply internalise the adult culture they are born into, but actually "create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own concerns" (Corsaro, 2017, p. 18). Corsaro suggests that children are preoccupied with gaining control over their lives and they also want to share this control with other children within the group, which they do through cultural routines that they construct within the peer group. These routines offer children security, because they are predictable and contribute to a sense of belonging to a group, providing children with "an emotional camaraderie of doing things together" (Corsaro, 2005, p. 234).

Peer group routines are also empowering. The sense of togetherness and security give children space to develop, interpret and construct new knowledge, through this appropriation of the adult world into their imaginary play in the peer group (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998). In addition, within the group children are concerned with *the protection of interactive space* (Corsaro, 2003). This can often seem somewhat brutal, as children will explicitly exclude another child from entering their play. Through his research, Corsaro (2003) found that this is not because children do not want to share their play with their peers, but rather "*they want to keep sharing what they are already sharing*" (p. 40). They are protecting their play from interference, which can occur numerous times in the day in an ECEC setting, both from other children and adults. Further research by Juutinen et al. (2018) show that exclusion from and inclusion in play is a continuously negotiated issue in the peer group and that the manner in which children are excluded can be discreet and often missed by educators. This can have a negative effect on children's wellbeing (Juutinen et al., 2018).

In order to overcome the risk of exclusion, children who have been excluded, whether on purpose or not, develop complex strategies in order to gain access (e.g. Corsaro, 2017; Kyratzis, 2004). These access strategies include non-verbal entry, encirclement and reference to affiliation (Corsaro, 2003). Non-verbal entry involves simply placing oneself within the perimeters of the ongoing play; encirclement involves observation and 'onlooker behaviour' where a child moves around the play, observing closely what is going on; and by referencing affiliation, children attempt to make it known that there is a similarity or a connection already there (Corsaro, 2003). All of these access strategies demonstrate children's sociality and their interest in interacting with their peers, being social and making connections, and having a sense of togetherness. Research also shows that children will use these access strategies even if they have not been excluded but are either new to the setting or simply just transitioning between spaces (Engdahl, 2021; Eun McDevitt & Recchia, 2022; Rúnarsdóttir & Valgeirsdóttir, 2019).

A recent study in Iceland by Jóhanna Einarsdóttir and Sara Margrét Ólafsdóttir (2020) explored children's own perspectives on participation, well-being and belonging in

ECEC, highlighting the importance of the peer group. The study revealed that having friends is the most important aspect for children to experience a sense of belonging. They want to have friends that they can play with (Einarsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2020). Furthermore, research examining transitions from ECEC to primary school shows that for children, having friends or not could be a deciding factor in whether the transition went well and if the beginning of formal schooling was a successful experience for the child (Peters, 2003). Within the peer group, therefore, 'togetherness' is crucial (van Oers & Hännikäinen, 2001). As defined in the introduction of this thesis, togetherness means having 'a sense of belonging to a group' (Corsaro, 2005), being accepted by the group (Hännikäinen, 1998) and being a 'full member' (Goffman, 1984). Being seen by others in the group as a legitimate member (Goffman, 1984) is a crucial aspect of the peer culture that members co-construct with each other through interactions and routines (Corsaro, 2017).

When looking at the peer group and peer culture this way, the importance of interactions, participation and togetherness within the group and the reproduction and interpretation of the child's world rather than the internalisation of the adult world (Corsaro, 1992) are apparent. Corsaro calls this '*interpretive reproduction*' (p. 162). This view of the child showcases the child as an active social agent, a competent member of their world. This view also highlights the importance of interactions within the peer group, as it is through interactions and collaboration that children are able to reproduce the adult culture in competent, interpretive ways (Corsaro, 1992).

Most of the research on the peer group conducted by Corsaro and his colleagues has been with children over the age of three (e.g. Corsaro, 1979a, 1979b, 2003, 2005; Corsaro & Molinari, 1990; Corsaro & Eder, 1990), although he did, in collaboration with Luisa Molinari (1990) conduct a study in an Italian *asilo nido* (ECEC for children under three years old). In this study, toddlers were found to be active in constructing, sharing and participating in their own routines and rules as a group. Corsaro and Molinari (1990) argued that these routines and rules gave the children control over their physical environment, which is also one of the key components of the peer culture (Corsaro, 2005). In the last two decades or so, numerous studies have been conducted on the toddler peer group, and this review will now turn to what previous research has told us about how toddlers interact and contribute to a sense of togetherness through various embodied strategies.

4.1.1 Toddlers and the peer group

In the last two to three decades, research has increasingly focused on toddler social relationships and the toddler peer group within ECEC. Engdahl (2011) found in her study with 17 to 24-month-old children that they did indeed construct their own routines and rules to gain access to play scenarios and that their access strategies were in many ways similar to those used by older children, although their strategies were mostly embodied.

In addition, Engdahl (2021) found that toddlers were keen to initiate interactions with their peers, showing preference to certain peers over others, greeting them and "consistently directing their interest and attention towards each other" (p. 123). Similarly, Ylikörkkö et al. (2023) observed that the routine of 'doing space' with play materials was used to gain control over the physical environment and to connect with other children. In this study, participation was approached similarly to the definition used by Berit Bae (2010), as relational rather than individual; participation is "a space that emerges continuously in various combinations of social, material and cultural relations" (Ylikörkkö et al., 2023, p. 1). In their study, participating toddlers used play materials to both navigate the space of the ECEC setting and to interact with peers. Through playing with a doll carriage, for example, the toddlers explored and became familiar with the space and with each other. They were 'doing space' of participation together, making their space their own and marking their right to exist within the space. The findings also indicated that toddlers negotiated with their peers through embodied strategies to develop their play and were highly competent in turn-taking throughout their interactions.

Furthermore, Eleni (2025) found that toddlers made use of different strategies in competent ways to initiate interactions with their peers, demonstrating their agency as competent social actors within the ECEC setting. They used environmental affordances such as offering playthings to peers; they used space and time to observe and follow their peers around to indicate their willingness to interact; and they used emotional embodied strategies such as hugging, touching and kissing. These actions build their sense of togetherness as members of a certain group, or in Gunvor Løkken's (2010) terms, the 'us-culture'.

According to Løkken (2004) embodied interactive strategies, such as repetition, imitation and humour, are how toddlers express their understanding of each other's meaning and purpose in play. Through these strategies, Løkken (2010) maintained, toddlers develop 'us-culture', togetherness in a group that forms over time. She further states that the toddler style is "recognisable in varied ways of running, jumping, trampling, twisting, bouncing and shouting, falling ostentatiously and laughing ostentatiously" (p. 173). Through these physical characteristics, toddlers construct their own rituals and routines, games and communities. There is repetition and joy in being together. These results align with Corsaro's (2017) research, which also showcases the routines within the peer group.

Anne Greve's (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) research on toddler friendship supports Løkken's findings and develops these ideas further. Greve suggests that familiarity and proximity are crucial factors, that is toddlers need time and repeated meetings to form social relations. Greve (2005) coined the term 'mutual we' (also translated from the Norwegian '*felles vi*' as 'common we') to describe this. The 'mutual we' describes how toddlers seek each other to create meaning together and relate to each other through physical play and humour. In her doctoral research, Greve (2007) followed a group of two-year-olds in a Norwegian ECEC setting and filmed their interactions and friendships

with the aim of identifying what constitutes friendships in the toddler peer group. The findings revealed that some markers or characteristics must be present for friendship to exist, as friendship is more than just about having fun together (Greve, 2007). Those markers included "that the children show preference for each other, that there is reciprocity, expressions of likeness, that the children have similar interests, that the relationship is voluntary and that the children experience that it is 'us that are together'" (Greve, 2007, p. 8). Interestingly, Greve (2009) also found that the toddlers had different 'friendship relations' with different peers, for example, a friendship built on 'joint focus on the dangerous' (p. 95) or a 'joint interest in the play' (p. 96), between the same toddler with two different toddlers. The 'mutual we' could, therefore, be accomplished in varied ways. Similarly, Eleni (2025) found that toddlers actively work towards forming togetherness and friendship relationships with peers through engaging with other children and the environment in embodied ways and showing reciprocity and engagement when peers initiate interactions, again, developing a 'mutual we'.

As stated above, Gunvor Løkken (2010) also identified this tendency within the toddler peer group and called it the 'us culture'. Similarly, in her study, Hrönn Pálmadóttir (2017) found that children aged one to two years try actively to interact with their peers, and these interactions are mostly about trying to connect to have a joint encounter. Their disputes were usually about toys and other available items, but they were related to their desire to make a connection and to secure solidarity with other children. The study also showed how competent young children are in organising their social worlds, maintaining a clear vision of what is acceptable. They express their understanding of values, such as 'rights', 'care', 'belonging' and 'discipline', through their embodied interactions and reactions to others' behaviour (Pálmadóttir, 2017). This can, for example, be seen when there is a conflict over toys. The findings indicate that toddlers understand that the child who first had the toy has the 'right' to the toy, even though the second toddler may still try to take that toy for themselves. Sometimes this would lead to the first toddler giving the toy in question or another toy to the second toddler, showing 'care' and empathy. The toddlers would also use exclusion strategies, such as verbal rejection or even physical force, for example laying on top of another peer, to reinforce who 'belongs' in the play. In addition, the participating toddlers clearly demonstrated their interpretation of the rules of the ECEC setting and would reinforce these rules, for example when a peer would use toys in an incongruous way, by 'disciplining' the offending toddler, telling them no or seeking assistance from an adult. Additional dispute research (Quinones et al., 2024) indicates that toddler interactions are also about recognition within the group of children and establishing an identity within the peer group. This inclination seems to be a common thread in the toddler peer group as numerous research has showcased (e.g. Engdahl, 2012; Greve, 2005; Greve & Kristoffersen Winje, 2012; Løkken, 2010); Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). These findings collectively suggest that toddlers want to be full members of their peer group, fully integrated and accepted within their 'team' (Goffman, 1984).

It has been established that toddlers are active social actors who want to make connections and have meaningful interactions with their peers, and that they often do this through joint encounters in play (Bateman, 2012; Corsaro, 1992; Greve, 2008; Løkken, 2004; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). However, the traditional view of play in the toddler peer group has been that it is mostly unsocial and solitary (Parten, 1932). Although this is an outdated way of looking at toddler play, it has been very persistent in the discourse around toddler play in ECEC, especially outside the field of ECEC research. Parten's (1932) research on children's play behaviour was groundbreaking at the time, as little or no attention had previously been paid to the social aspects of young children's lives in sociology. She categorised children's play into six categories: 1) unoccupied behaviour, 2) onlooker, 3) solitary play, 4) parallel activity, 5) associative play and 6) cooperative play. One of her main arguments for why a play activity was considered to be in the first four categories, was because there was no talking or discussion between the children, for example, in parallel activity. "There is very little conversation about what they are making. No one attempts to tell who may or may not come to the sandbox" (Parten, 1932, p. 251). Parten's definition of an interaction is verbal in nature.

This definition has also been used by research criticising Parten's categorisation of play, explaining that parallel play, for example, is play were "...social contact is only through gaze and imitation, but not through interacting with one another" (Xu, 2010, p. 492). This view of embodied interaction as non-interaction has, in recent decades, been rebuked, as researchers have shown that non-verbal or embodied interactions are indeed important when examining toddler peer participation in play, and that there is a great deal of interaction taking place between very young children even if it is not spoken. Embodied interactions, such as gaze, touch, humour and imitation are common interactive strategies that toddlers use (e.g. Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020). These embodied strategies have been shown to be crucial when co-creating participation with other children through joint attention and joint engagement in playful interactions (Engdahl, 2011; Kidwell, 2005; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). In the following section, some of these embodied interactive strategies seen in the toddler peer group will be examined.

4.2 Embodied interactions in the toddler peer group

As previously established, being a desirable playmate to their peers is important to toddlers (e.g. Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2021; Greve, 2008; Greve & Kristoffersen Winje, 2012; Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007; Løkken, 2010; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). Toddlers use varied embodied strategies in order to gain shared attention and establish an interaction with peers. Through these approaches, they co-construct shared meaning and action within the peer group or attempt to resist adult intervention in their play or interaction (Rutanen, 2007).

Interactions in the toddler peer group are often multimodal, that is, they are a combination of different ways of interacting. As defined in the introduction of this thesis, multimodality is "the various resources mobilized by participants for organizing their actions – such as gestures, gaze, facial expressions, body postures, body movements" (Mondada, 1016, p. 4). For embodied interactions, this means that contact can include touch, gaze, gesturing, vocalisation, or some or all of these (Cekaite & Mondada, 2021b). Initiations do not always lead to interactions, even when they seem to follow all the 'rules' of the toddlers' normal access strategies. Learning to understand what the other child means by their action is a complicated process. More research is needed on peer-to-peer embodied interactions in the toddler peer group and particularly how young children initiate their interactions, the strategies they use and what they look like. In the following sections, some of the different embodied strategies toddlers often use in their interactions, *gaze*, *touch*, *humour* and *imitation*, will be examined.

4.2.1 Gaze

Over the past few decades, studies on conversations and social interactions have demonstrated that gaze, or the act of looking, is vital for fostering joint engagement during interactions (Goffman 1963; Kidwell, 2005; Pursi, 2022). Additionally, research involving toddlers has revealed that they utilise gaze and facial expressions to capture each other's attention, thereby establishing joint attention, which is essential for positive peer interactions such as playing together (Pálmadóttir, 2017). When toddlers wish to engage in play, they tend to seek each other's eyes to make contact (Engdahl, 2011).

When looking at toddlers' interactions with their parents, Anna Filipi (2009) found that through gaze and pointing they are capable of complex interaction long before they can communicate verbally. Her research was conducted with four pairs of parent-child participants, and their interactions were recorded during the ages from 9 to 14 months. In her study, Filipi (2009) focused on pointing as a frame for joint attention. She indicated that young, mostly pre-verbal children use pointing, followed by a gaze and other gestures to get adults' attention and thereby initiate a sequence of interactions. Filipi's study shows that not only is the use of embodied strategies crucial for children under two years of age, in regard to their social interactions, these embodied interactions can also be quite complex and intricate, sort of 'silent negotiations' that can co-construct interactions.

Mardi Kidwell's (2005) research with toddlers and their caregivers' use of gaze reveals that "*being looked at* is a complex communicative matter" (p. 443), as toddlers respond differently to various types of adults looks. The motivations behind the gaze can vary and interpreting these requires a degree of social competence to discern the intention. Kidwell's study investigates 'the gaze' as a tool of social control and examines how different types of adults' looks can influence a child's behaviour. Her findings underscore the pivotal role that gaze plays in social interactions within early childhood settings and

demonstrate how children are able to regulate and organise their behaviour in accordance with the type of look they receive (Kidwell, 2005).

Although the current study focuses on peer interactions rather than child-adult dynamics, the evidence that young children are capable of interpreting nuanced gazes remains pertinent. It highlights their sophisticated social capabilities, particularly within peer group settings, where mutual gaze and eye contact are essential for interaction. Further research by Kidwell (2009) illustrates that toddlers not only interpret caregivers' gazes but also monitor the gaze of their peers to anticipate social repercussions. They do this through observations. In situations Kidwell terms 'toddler harassments', such as taking toys or hitting, children adjust their behaviour in anticipation of potential adult intervention. This adjustment is based on past experiences in which a peer's gaze directed towards a caregiver typically preceded such an intervention (Kidwell, 2009).

Children learn to differentiate between various types of caregivers' looks and also begin to interpret their peers' gazes in response to socially inappropriate behaviours. Through social interactions, they develop an understanding of gaze shifts as what Kidwell (2009, p. 158) calls a 'notification device'. These shifts alert children to events that may carry consequences, thereby allowing them to respond in socially appropriate ways. Moreover, children come to recognise the significance of the duration of a gaze, which can indicate whether or not something has captured the gazer's attention. Such behaviours are inherently complex and demand that children 'read' both their own and others' actions, as well as comprehend the potential outcomes of those actions. That toddlers have opportunity and time to observe and reflect on what they are seeing is, therefore, important. While these communicative skills often emerge in toddler-adult interactions, they provide a foundational framework that children apply in peer relationships as well.

The above-mentioned research by Filipi (2009) and Kidwell (2005; 2009) demonstrate that toddlers engage in complex, non-verbal interactions well before they develop spoken language. Filipi shows how gestures, such as pointing and gaze, enable young children to initiate joint attention and co-construct social exchanges, while Kidwell highlights the nuanced roles of gaze as both a communicative and regulatory tool in early social interactions, influencing behaviour in both adult-child and peer contexts. Together, these studies reveal the sophistication of toddlers' embodied social competencies and their ability to interpret and respond to subtle social cues.

According to the research by Filipi and Kidwell, it is significant to observe toddlers' social interactions. As the discussion in Section 4.1.1 highlighted, 'onlooker' behaviour has traditionally not been classified as a social interaction (Parten, 1932) although a multitude of research has shown the opposite. For instance, an onlooker child may be observing certain peers over others, indicating a preference (Engdahl, 2012; Greve, 2005). Furthermore, a child may be utilising a form of 'encirclement' and 'reference to affiliation' (Corsaro & Eder, 1990) as access strategy by sitting close to the other children and observing. The act of observing through gaze helps the child understand the play.

Onlooker behaviour can also be a way of 'preparing the encounter' (De Stefani & Mondada, 2018). Sighting another through the gaze is the first step in an interaction, followed by a greeting and consequent turn-taking (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; De Stefani & Mondada, 2018).

In their research on interactions in the toddler peer group, Monaco and Pontecorvo (2010) suggest that young toddlers sometimes act as an audience to an ongoing interaction through observing in close proximity which is a valuable role to play in the peer group. They use the term 'aspirant participation' to describe this role (p. 357). Through observation, the toddlers are showing their interest in the ongoing interaction and making themselves available to the other children. 'Aspirant participation' is therefore also active participation, if we look at participation as Berit Bae (2009, 2010) suggests, as relational and cooperative.

4.2.2 Touch

Touch is important to human beings. Extensive research has been conducted on how touch impacts human development and the devastating effect the lack of touch can have on children (Bales et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1969; Noddings, 2012). Several studies have also been conducted on adult-child touch, with results indicating that physical contact between adults and children in early childhood settings are mostly of three types: 1) to control or direct the child, 2) to comfort the child (Cekaite, 2016; Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018); Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017) and 3) to diagnose the child, for example, to touch a child's forehead to gauge their temperature (Bateman, 2015).

There is also a growing body of research on the role touch plays in social interaction and communications between peers (Cekaite et al., 2024; Ekström & Cekaite, 2024b). In their study of touch in peer interactions among children ages one through five, Ekström and Cekaite (2024a, 2024b) found that touch serves multiple functions. Beyond expressing emotion, affection, and comfort, it is also used to guide, control, attract attention and establish shared attention. As such, touch plays a key role in relationship-building, acting as an 'affective encounter' that fosters a sense of shared identity or a collective 'we' (Cekatie, 2016), as also observed by Løkken (2010) and Greve and Kristoffersen Winje (2012). Interestingly, Ekström and Cekaite (2024b) observed most of the touch episodes, as they call these interactions based on touch, among children above toddler age (over the age of two). They found that touch was mostly initiated by the older child if a toddler was involved. They did not observe many touch episodes among toddler-aged children. It may be of interest for further study to examine if this might be because of the mixed ages in the group of children and if the same would have been observed if there were only toddlers present.

When considering the role touch plays in social interactions, it is important to view it through a multimodal lens and as a collective action rather than an individualistic one, with touch often being used to align bodies to each other or towards an objective of joint

attention (Cekaite & Mondada, 2021b; M.H. Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012). There is always a *toucher* and a *touched* where receptivity and reciprocity between two interlocutors are necessary for the touch episode to be successfully co-produced.

4.2.3 Humour

When examining emotions within social interactions, it is important to look at the whole interactions between two or more individuals, not only at the one showing emotions. Humour indicates a positive emotion, often displayed through smiling and laughing, and it is a social practice that cannot be studied without examining all participants (M.H. Goodwin et al., 2012).

Laughter, as one form of humour, is often used in social interactions to create a shared experience and a sense of belonging to a certain group or a community. This can be seen in both adult interactions as well as between children of all ages (Strid & Cekaite, 2021). Furthermore, research has also shown that there is a difference in the use of laughter between adults and between children in ECEC; children use laughter as an interactional tool, while adults might use laughter more as an educational tool (Cekaite & Andrén, 2019). The use of laughter in social interactions includes interactions in the toddler peer group. Their social interactions are often humorous and repetitive, filled with laughter, noise and joy. Toddlers will use laughter and silliness as a way of acting out the 'we' against the teacher, as they strengthen their alliance as a group, and the 'mutual we' is displayed as a similar stance through humorous behaviours (Greve & Kristoffersen Winje, 2012; Løkken, 2010; Loizou, 2004;).

In her research on humour in an infant childcare setting, Eleni Loizou (2004) defines humour as twofold. First, humour is connected to actions that are out of the ordinary, actions that are unexpected; this she calls 'incongruous humour'. Secondly, 'empowering humour' is identified, including actions of breaking the rules and creating a shared togetherness within the peer group. Her findings suggest that there are two main factors that impact the humorous experiences young children can have: the curriculum and the role of the teacher. Through a curriculum that is child-centred and play-based, with varied opportunities for the children to self-select what and how they play, young children are very inventive and capable of creating humorous interactions with other children and with their caregivers (Eleni, 2025; Loizou, 2004). Humour also happens through using the material available to the children in the 'wrong' ways as well as breaking the rules in playful manners during activities, for example by resisting doing a task (Cekaite & Andrén, 2019; Loizou, 2004). Similarly, Løkken (2010), found that humour is crucial to toddler interactions, as 'joyful repetition is held to make clear the playful quality of social interactions and the simple structure is seen as making the form and the meaning of the game clear to the participants, and therefore easy to repeat' (Løkken, 2010, p. 173).

Furthermore, Loizou (2005) observed that the role of the caregiver or teacher, in providing and supporting humorous behaviour was diverse. This included simply

watching the behaviour; directing the behaviour and giving suggestions in order to help the children interact more successfully with their peers; participating actively in the behaviour or activity; initiating the humorous behaviour; and finally, scaffolding the behaviour with verbal cues (Loizou, 2005). This role of the adult is also supported by Cekaite and Andrén's (2019) study on laughter in ECEC, although with three- to five-year-old children. Their study shows that adults usually do not participate in the laughter interactions but could either support the laughter by smiling or attempt to stop it by disciplining. Young children's shared laughter is an area of social interaction that still needs more study (Strid & Cekaite, 2021) but research that has been conducted on the topic shows that toddlers use laughter as an invitation to interact and as a signal of interest to play together, as well as a tool to strengthen the bond between children within the peer group (Cekaite & Andrén, 2019; Engdahl, 2011).

4.2.4 Imitation

In one of his lectures on conversations, Harvey Sacks (1995), the founder of conversation analysis, discussed the phenomenon of seeing an 'imitation', that is, seeing a child imitating an act an adult would perform. We do not see the adult's act; we see the child "doing an imitation" (Sacks, 1995, p. 479). In his discussion, Sacks explained that this is a question of who 'owns the act'; that is, a child is not seen as an adult who does adult things, but rather as an imitator, even if the act of imitation is done in the same competent way as the 'real' act. Sacks argued that this went against his view of the child as an active social actor, competently participating in the "social orders of everyday life" (Danby, 2021, p. 143). In fact, Sacks and associates were adamant that the social activities of children needed to be observed carefully and taken seriously in their own right (Garfinkel et al., 1982, as cited in Danby, 2021). Imitation by children could indeed be seen as an act of communicating to the world around them that they understand what these 'real' acts are and how to perform them. Such imitation shows their sociality through this willingness and availability to interact. Building further on the work of Sacks and associates, in his research on the peer group of preschool aged children, Corsaro (2017) claims that children imitate aspects of the adult culture through '*interpretive reproduction*'. They do not just imitate the 'real' act (Sacks, 1995); rather, they make that act their own, contributing in active ways to the maintenance and extension of the adult culture (Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

Going further still, Corsaro (1979a) also saw imitation as an interactive strategy children use to gain access to an ongoing interaction or play activity. Children will imitate the acts of the other children in order to showcase to them their willingness and availability to join the play, using imitation as communication, indicating that they understand what is going on in the play. This is important, as it signals to the other children that the child can be accepted into the interaction or play activity since they know that they will not 'mess things up' (Corsaro, 2017, p. 167). This use of imitation is, therefore, a communicative strategy (Altınok et al., 2023). In Altınok and associates' research, they conducted experiments to

see how preschool aged children used imitation. The research design was very different from the CA emphasis on naturally occurring interactions; however, the results are relevant to this research, as they showed that the participating children would not only imitate but do so communicatively by monitoring whether the other person would notice or be able to see and, consequently, modify their imitations accordingly. In other words, the imitation was not only for imitation's sake, not just imitating the 'real' act, but it served a particular social purpose. Other embodied interactive strategies, such as gestures, smiles and vocalisations were also frequently observed. In addition, the children often modified their imitations, indicating that they were actively contributing to the interaction (Altınok et al., 2023).

A basic premise of an interaction is that every action within it is consequential to the next one; every participant in the interaction needs to understand prior actions in order to be able to reply appropriately. Through this accumulative action, interactions occur. Initiating interactions is a form of 'becoming copresent' (Pillet-Shore, 2018), a preparatory activity that needs to take place before the interaction becomes ongoing. These activities are integral to the beginning of an interaction. Imitation as an initiation of interaction can therefore be classified as a pre-opening, a way children display recognition of what is going on and "celebrate ... being in the same place at the same time" (De Stefani & Mondada, 2018, 268) as their peers.

When examining imitation as interaction in this way, the work of Charles Goodwin (2018) on imitation as a co-operative action, is fundamental. Looking at imitation in this light, positions it as not only imitating a previous act, but it is about "inhabit[ing] each other's actions (p. 1) through 'reusing with transformation' the previous acts of others. Goodwin (2018, p. 23) says:

> Reuse with transformation of structure made publicly available through the actions of earlier actors leads to the processive accumulation, with locally relevant medication, of structure inherited from predecessors, a process that sits at the heart of human action.

He further explains that this way of taking previous actions, decomposing them and reusing them with transformation, is what he calls 'co-operative' action (C. Goodwin, 2018). The people involved in such an interaction "co-operate together by performing operations on resources they are working with together" (C. Goodwin, 2018, p. 6). Imitation is, therefore, not an individual act, but a 'public social practice' that people use to co-construct their social world. In the study by Altınok and associates (2023), this can also be seen in the way the children amended their imitative acts to make them visible to the other person; their imitation became a 'public social practice'. Imitation is, therefore, a complex interactive strategy that lies at the core of human sociality.

The above review is about research conducted with preschool and school children, not toddlers. It is, however, also clear from previous research in the toddler peer group, that

toddlers use imitation as an interactive strategy. For example, Løkken (2010) discusses how toddlers create mutual routines within their peer group, often through imitation and joyful repetitions of mutual acts, such as laughing or falling down ostentatiously. In her writing, Greve (2009) states that imitation is not only a reproduction of a previous act but an affective encounter. The child interprets the previous act and reuses it, and in so doing turns it into a new contribution to the interaction. By doing this, they contribute to the development of the 'mutual we' (Greve, 2005). In subsequent research in the toddler peer group, similar findings have been reported (e.g. Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2011, 2021).

Previous research has shown that toddlers use various embodied strategies, such as gaze, touch, humour and imitation, to engage and interact with their peers and establish shared attention and a 'mutual we'. The findings highlight the complexity of these multimodal interactions, demonstrating toddlers' sociality and social competence. They show that gaze is fundamental for joint engagement in the toddler peer group; touch serves different functions, such as guiding and comforting; humour promotes a sense of togetherness; and imitation is used to gain access to ongoing interactions as well as to initiate interactions. Through these embodied strategies, toddlers co-construct their peer group and navigate their peer relationships in competent ways, showcasing their sociality by multiple means.

4.3 Participation frameworks

As the above discussion shows, the outlined embodied strategies are interactive; they are a way for children to co-produce a 'participation framework'. Charles and Marjorie Goodwin (2004) defined participation frameworks as a social construct where individuals within a certain group co-produce interactions through verbal and embodied actions. Furthermore, each of these verbal or embodied actions contribute to the co-construction of the participation framework as "a temporally unfolding, interactively sustained embodied course of activity" (Goodwin, 1996, p. 375). In their discussion on participation, the Goodwins (2004) present the findings of a study conducted with Charles' father, Chil, who had aphasia, and therefore, was not able to express more than a few single word utterances. He was, however, highly competent in interacting with the people around him through the way he positioned his body to show his own assessment and understanding of what was going on. In this study, the other people present treated Chil as "an alert, cognitively alive, indeed sharp and perceptive participant..." (C. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, p. 229). It is, therefore, of interest in this research project to treat toddlers as perceptive participants, as similarities might be found between participants who have limited verbal resources to communicate and very young children who rely on embodied interactive strategies as their main method of communicating with others.

When examining participation frameworks co-produced by young children, the shared interest and placement of the body are key actions, making them "visible as being together and orienting to the same focus of attention" (Bateman, 2022, p. 60). Indeed, there needs to be a feeling of a 'mutual we' (Greve, 2005). In groundbreaking research on participation frameworks in interactions conducted by Goffman (1981), he addresses how people 'orient to the same focus of attention'. He examined the roles of participants in a conversation, deconstructing their parts in order to fully understand what actually happens. According to Goffman (1981), a conversational encounter needs at least two participants, a speaker and a hearer. The speaker can be speaking directly to the hearer but can also be speaking to others present. The hearer can have different roles depending on whom the speaker is addressing. Goffman talks about 'bystanders', 'overhearers' and 'eavesdroppers' as well as the addressed hearer (Goffman, 1981, p. 132). In this research project, the focus is on the role of the toddlers as possible 'bystanders'. Goffman describes bystanders as an un-ratified participant in a conversation, someone who is close enough to hear the conversation and the people taking part in the conversation know this. Bystanders adhere to the ethical principles of 'enacting a show of disinterest' (Goffman, 1981, p. 134) as to not interrupt unduly while still following what is going on and understanding the interaction. This can perhaps be compared to the access strategy of 'encirclement' that Corsaro (2003) uses to describe how children will observe and make their observing noticeable to the other children. This type of observation is always context sensitive. It is important to know when following other people's interactions is acceptable and when it enters into 'eavesdropper' territory. In Goffman's terms (1981), this type of observation is 'focused interaction' and can be important in knowing how to act if you are accepted into the participation framework.

In conversational participation frameworks, when there are more than two participants, it is common for there to be a change in the addressed hearer and speaker, as people will join and leave a conversation. Therefore, a bystander can easily become a speaker or a hearer. Goffman uses the term 'gathering' (1981, p. 136) to explain how a conversational encounter becomes a wider 'social situation'. In this way, he defines a gathering as a participation framework where certain individuals are active participants in a particular social situation (Goffman, 1981), going back and forth between being addressed and not being addressed.

It is important to note that Goffman's work on was verbal conversations and has been criticised for its limitations. The Goodwins (2004) claim that Goffman's approach was too limited, focusing mainly on competent speakers and mostly ignoring the embodied strategies people use when having conversations or non-verbal interactions, supporting their claim with, for example, the study with Charles' father discussed above. Those findings strongly suggest that the positionality of the body plays a large role in embodied interactions. In addition, it is important to examine the position of the body in an interaction, as aligning the body in a way that indicates to others our interest to interact is central to a successful interaction (C. Goodwin, 2007). Charles Goodwin further claims

that this alignment of the body indicates to others a 'co-operative stance', which is crucial when attempting to build a participation framework within an interaction. In addition to showing a co-operative stance through body alignment, toddlers also show it, for example, through gaze and imitation (Engdahl, 2011; Greve, 2008; Løkken, 2010).

When participation frameworks have been successfully built within an interaction, they are further maintained through a process termed 'F-formation':

> An F-formation arises whenever two or more people sustain a spatial and orientational relationship in which the space between them is one to which they have equal, direct, and exclusive access … It provides a means by which the participants can maintain differential access to one another and it facilitates the maintenance of a common focus of attention. (Kendon, 1990, as cited in Bateman, 2022, p. 59)

Kendon claims that bodily alignment is crucial for participation frameworks, as that is how people sustain a 'spatial and orientational relationship'. He further states that the use of the space within the participation framework is significant, as participants are 'orienting their bodies in such a way that each of them has an easy, direct and equal access to every other participant's transactional segment' (Kendon, 1990, as cited in Bateman, 2022, p. 60). This 'orienting of the bodies' indicates a 'co-operative stance' (C. Goodwin, 2007). Toddlers' bodily alignment can clearly be seen in previous studies in which they often not only orient their bodies towards peers with whom they are interested in interacting, but they also use embodied strategies such a touch to indicate a 'co-operative stance', for example, by hugging or stroking each other (Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2021).

The Goodwins (2004) further argue that if we examine embodied and other non-verbal strategies people use in interactions, we can see how "different kinds of parties build action together by *participating* in structured ways in the events that constitute a state of talk" (p. 225). In this way, we can observe a variety of social resources people utilise when interacting with others. Events that 'constitute a state of talk', therefore, include all the different embodied strategies toddlers use, such as gaze, smile, touch, humour and imitation (Engdahl, 2012; Greve, 2008; Greve & Kristoffersen Winje, 2012; Pursi, 2022; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020). Thus, we can see that 'participation is action' (C. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004).

To summarise, when examining 'participation as action' in the toddler peer group, gaze is one of the key strategies used to interact. The act of looking has been shown to play an important role in creating joint engagement in an interaction, perhaps placing toddlers in the category of 'bystander' (Goffman, 1981), someone who has the ability to enter the interaction. Corsaro (2017) discusses non-verbal entry and encircling as two of the strategies children use to gain access to an ongoing play activity. Through non-verbal entry and encirclement, young children use gaze to gain an understanding of what is happening within the play they want to join and as a signal to the other children that they

are available (Corsaro & Molinari, 1990). In a way, both non-verbal entry and encircling align with bystanders in Goffman's (1981) terms as they are waiting for cues to join the 'gathering' (Goffman, 1981).

4.4 The role of the teacher

Even though this study focuses on peer interactions in the toddler peer group, and not the role of the teacher, it is important to note that the teacher does play a crucial role in supporting and possibly even facilitating these interactions. This study uses a conceptual framework within the social constructionist perspective, in which people co-construct the social world in collaboration with each other. Vygotsky (1978) discusses the *zone of proximal development* where a child can learn with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other, either an adult or another child. Even though the view of the toddler that informs this research is as a competent, capable social actor, this does not, however, negate the fact that toddlers are novices in ECEC and navigating the social world of ECEC settings is a complex, multifaceted process (Eun McDevitt & Recchia, 2022). The role of the teacher is also important when we see toddlers do 'aspirant participation' (Monaco & Pontecorvo, 2010, p. 358). Even though they argue that this is also active participation, a responsive teacher will need to know how and when to intervene through direct support or through observation.

It is crucial for toddlers to feel secure and comfortable in the setting and for them to experience the 'mutual we' (Greve, 2008). In Iceland, toddler-aged children are usually new to ECEC settings and the transition from home to ECEC can be stressful (Nystad et al., 2021). The role of a responsive teacher is, therefore, important (Pursi, 2022; White et al., 2020). Knowing and understanding the embodied strategies toddlers use to interact with their peers is fundamental to be able to support toddler interactions in a way that does not hinder or disrupt interactions that do not need adult assistance. In her study on toddler friendships, Anne Greve (2005) found several instances in which the adult would inadvertently disrupt toddler peer interactions with well meaning 'assistance'. Sometimes giving assistance or responding to what is happening in the toddler peer group involves not approaching and interfering but waiting and observing. Knowing how to 'assist' can be complex. As Greve (2005) states:

> Many times, it is best if the teacher is more retired as a safe resort. Other times it is important with a more direct participation [...] The challenge for the teacher is to know when it is necessary to take part in the play, and when it is more appropriate to keep a certain distance (p. 7).

This suggests that knowledge about how toddlers interact and build their 'mutual we' is an important base for ECEC teachers; in addition, teachers should view the toddler as capable and competent in their social interactions.

In regard to the playful *toddling style* conceptualised by Løkken (2010), research by Quinones and Pursi (2020) suggests that adult participation in play is important for creating a playful community within a toddler room in an ECEC setting. The role of the teacher in providing emotional and playful support helps toddlers explore and maintain the playful toddling style, therefore, supporting peer interactions. Annukka Pursi's (2022) research further suggests that by focusing on the group of toddlers when assisting one toddler to process an emotionally challenging situation, such as separation from a parent, can be a building block for developing peer relationships, as these are joint experiences that most of the toddlers will recognise. Working through these difficult feelings can then be done through play and playful interactions where the teacher supports the group of children to also explore these emotions through peer interactions (Pursi, 2022). One way that teachers can provide emotional and playful support to toddlers is through spacious communication (Bae, 2010), which means being open to children's questions and comments about their experiences in ECEC. In order for teachers to be able to respond to toddlers' questions, they need to understand them and their embodied ways of communicating and interacting with the world.

4.5 Summary and gaps

Chapter 4 aims to provide an overview of the background to this thesis as well as review the current research in the field of toddler social interactions. The case has been made that the peer group is important to toddlers, and they are competent in co-constructing their own peer culture and making meaningful connections with their peers, using embodied interactive strategies, which showcase their sociality.

In this chapter, literature was reviewed on the various embodied strategies toddlers use to initiate and join interactions, such as gaze, touch, humour and imitation. Previous studies (Kidwell, 2005, 2009) have confirmed that gaze is crucial for establishing joint attention and positive peer interactions, while touch can be used to show affection or guide peers (Cekaite et al., 2024; Ekström & Cekaite, 2024b). Humour is important for creating a sense of togetherness and shared experiences within the peer group (Greve, 2008; Loizou, 2004; Løkken, 2010; Pursi, 2022), while imitation serves as a communicative and interactive strategy, signalling a willingness to interact and an understanding of the ongoing interaction (Corsaro, 2017; C. Goodwin, 2018; Sacks, 1995). These strategies highlight toddlers' social competence and their ability to navigate complex social interactions – what I argue is 'toddler sociality'.

The concept of 'togetherness' or 'mutual we' is central to toddler peer interactions, where children co-construct routines and rules through embodied actions. This sense of togetherness is supported by research showing that toddlers seek to connect with their peers and create a shared bond through joint attention and engagement. The participation framework provides a structure for understanding how toddlers co-produce interactions through verbal and embodied actions. This framework emphasises the

importance of aligning the body and using various interactive tools to build successful interactions.

To briefly summarise, the previous research reviewed in this chapter underscores the significance of peer interactions in ECEC and the advanced interactive strategies toddlers use to engage with their peers. By examining these interactions using the detailed sequential methods of multimodal conversation analysis, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of toddler sociality, and the significance social interactions have for toddlers within their peer group. More research is needed on peer-to-peer embodied interactions in the toddler peer group and particularly on how young children initiate their interactions and what those strategies look like.

4.5.1 Intended contribution

The intended contribution of this PhD research is threefold: First, I would like to contribute to the existing theoretical knowledge of toddler sociality and toddlers' social experiences within ECEC settings through highlighting their embodied interactions with their peers. The outdated view of toddlers as unsocial and egocentric is still heard within the ECEC system in Iceland and internationally. My hope is to pick away at these obsolete views by demonstrating toddlers' competencies and willingness to engage socially with their peers.

Second, I believe that by drawing attention to these embodied interactions, we can help increase the quality of education and care in practice with toddlers, as well as ECEC teachers' professional development. Through providing a deeper understanding of what is important to toddlers in relation to interactions in the peer group, we can better support their attempts at creating joint attention and togetherness with their peers. When teachers understand these interactions, they can also better argue for pedagogical practices that support and value the way toddlers interact and why it is important to support and encourage these interactions.

Third, exploring these embodied interactions through a multimodal conversation analysis approach has never been done within the Icelandic context, so this study will contribute an original outlook for Icelandic ECEC teachers and researchers to explore. This is also a fairly new approach in the international context, in regard to embodied toddler peer interactions, and is therefore, an important and original contribution to the field of ECEC globally. I believe that multimodal CA research will contribute to childhood studies with a slightly different outlook than other approaches but working towards providing new knowledge to the field of ECEC for the benefit of young children.

4.5.2 Research questions

The aim of this research is to explore toddler sociality through gaining an understanding of embodied social interactions in the toddler peer group in an ECEC setting in Iceland.

The specific focus is on how toddlers initiate interactions with their peers and what embodied strategies they use to gain shared attention and join each other's participation frameworks. This was observed through detailed examination of embodied interactions through the lens of multimodal conversation analysis. This framework has the potential to allow us to see the strengths and capabilities of toddler-aged children as they navigate their complex social worlds within their peer group.

The main research question is: *How do toddler-aged children initiate and participate in interactions with their peers within an ECEC setting in Iceland?*

The three sub-questions are as follows:

- W*hat embodied strategies do toddlers use to initiate an interaction with their peers?*
- *How do toddlers orient to embodied humour in their initiation of peer interactions?*
- *How do toddlers use observing and imitating as a pre-opening in the peer group?*

5 Research Design and Methods

In Chapter 5, I will describe the research design in detail, the field of study, the participants and the methods used for data collection. I will also explain the data analysis and the ethical considerations that arise when conducting research with very young children. The chapter will conclude with reflections on the trustworthiness of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into and an understanding of the research process and the reliability of the findings.

5.1 An ethnomethodological ethnographic case study

This research employed an ethnomethodological ethnographic case study approach. Ethnography and ethnomethodology are not the same and should not be thought to mean the same thing. Ethnography, broadly speaking, is a method while ethnomethodology is not a method but the name for the "*phenomenon* the research investigates, rather than the method of investigation" (Rawls & Lynch, 2024, 117). Ethnomethodological ethnography is fieldwork where the researcher understands and, therefore, is able to reproduce the details observed in the field (Meier zu Verl & Meyer, 2024). This is important, because in ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA), the context matters. In order to understand the *phenomenon* under study, the ethnomethodologist doing ethnography will describe what happens in the context with precise detail, focusing on *how* members of a group *do* interaction, rather than *why* (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). For EMCA researchers, ethnography is therefore an important method to understand contextual details and "as a way to describe what parties on an occasion perform, invoke, or display as grounds for their actions" (Rawls & Lynch, 2024, 135). This was done through a case study approach.

A case study is an in-depth examination of an 'individual unit' over a period of time in a particular context (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In this research, the 'individual unit' consisted of a group of toddlers from a single ECEC room in Iceland. The field work lasted 9 months. Participant observations were conducted using video recordings and field notes which is relevant to research within the field of EMCA where the observer should be present in the field so they can 'see the action "as it happens"' (Kreplak & Velkovska, 2025). Through this ethnomethodological ethnographic study, I placed myself in the 'presence of the phenomena' being studied (Schwarts as cited in Kreplak & Velkovska, 2025). In this way I attempted to gain an understanding of embodied interactions within the toddler peer group, as well as make myself available to the children if they wanted or needed to approach me (Lichtman, 2013). The main goal for choosing a case study approach was to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of embodied social interactions.

5.1.1 The field of study

The criteria for choosing the ECEC setting for this research project was twofold. First, there needed to be children around two years old in the setting. Second, it needed to be convenient for me as the researcher to access the setting throughout the entire academic year. I chose the ECEC setting because of my previous knowledge of the day-to-day practice there and because I knew it had a 'typical' toddler room setting (Lichtman, 2013), which was important for the research goals. I had previously worked there for several years and had an excellent professional relationship with the management team, as well as with most of the teachers and staff.

The participating ECEC is a full-time setting with, at the time, 80 children ranging in age from 16 months to 5 years. Most of the children spend seven to eight hours a day, five days a week in the setting. The ECEC is run by the local municipality and is located in a small town in Iceland. It adheres to both the Icelandic ECEC national curriculum guidelines as well as its own 'school' curriculum, as mandated by the *Preschool Act* (Lög um leikskóla nr.87/2008). The setting employs the Reggio Emilia approach, a child-centred pedagogy, which focuses on democracy and creativity with the view that children learn best through discovery and exploration (Edwards et al., 1993). At the beginning of the data collection, there were four rooms in the setting, all age divided (a toddler room (one to two years old), a three-year-old room, a four-year-old room and a five-year-old room). In the middle of the data collection period, a fifth room was added in a different location. The five-year-old children moved there, and other age groups moved to different rooms. The oldest children in the toddler room also moved to another room, which created space for additional children in the toddler room.

At the time of the data collection, each room had at least four adults, with one room having additional staffing due to inclusive practices. In addition, the setting had a special education teacher who worked with children in all the rooms, advised teachers and parents and provided special education to children who needed additional assistance in their learning. There were also a manager and an assistant manager, who were both hands-on, spending time during the week in each room with the children and assisting teachers and staff.

The toddler room consists of a six different rooms and areas. There is a large common room, a small playroom, a bathroom/diaper-changing room, an open common room, the changing room/coat room in the hallway and the outdoor playground. The outdoor playground is fenced off from the larger playground for the older children for safety reasons. As the children age and become more secure and confident in being in the playground, they can move to the larger area.

5.1.2 Participants

The participants in the research project were children from the toddler room in the selected ECEC setting. At the beginning of the data collection period (October 2015), there were 16 children in the toddler room but at the middle of the school year, there were changes made in the setting, which resulted in children moving to different rooms and new and younger children starting the program. In January 2016, three new children started in the toddler room and in February, 13 of the oldest children moved to a new room and 10 new children arrived. This made the number of children in the toddler room 16 once again. In total, 29 children attended the toddler room at some point during the data collection period; parents of 25 children consented to have their child participate in the research.

As this is a large number of children to observe, I needed a framework for my data collection, and, therefore, chose four of the children to be the 'case study' toddlers. The aim of the research was to examine the social interactions of children aged 18-36 months. Although I chose an age range up to age three, I wanted my participants to be closer to two years of age during the data collection period. In order for the participants not to 'age out' during the 9 months of data collection, I selected the four youngest children in the room, who would be aged 18-28 months during the data collection period, to be the 'case study' toddlers.

After discussing this matter with the head teacher in the toddler room, I decided on three of the youngest children plus one other. This was because the fourth of the youngest children (Freyja, a pseudonym) attended sporadically in the first few months of the data collection period, which could influence her interactions with the other children. It is important to note that although these four case study toddlers were the focus of the study, they were case studies only as a framework and were not the only participants. All of the toddlers in the room (that had parental consent) were full participants in the study and treated the same in regard to informed consent from gatekeepers and in how I elicited assent from the toddlers themselves. I discuss this in detail in Section 5.3.1 and 5.3.2.

The case study children for the first part of the data collection period consisted of two girls and two boys with the pseudonyms Harry, Vera, Adam and Sandra. In February, Sandra moved to another room and Freyja replaced her as a case study toddler. Their ages can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Case study toddlers

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at beginning of data collection October 2015	Age at end of data collection June 2016
Vera	Girl	1 year 9 months	2 years 6 months
Harry	Boy	1 year 9 months	2 years 6 months
Adam	Boy	1 year 8 months	2 year 5 months
Sandra	Girl	1 year 11 months	(Feb) 2 years 3 months
Freyja	Girl	1 year 9 months	2 years 6 months

Although I focused on these toddlers, they were not always present during my observations and, therefore, some of the interactions analysed do not include the case study toddlers. These toddlers also interacted with several other children, so the sequences of interactions usually included more than five children. As I stated above, the choice of case study toddlers was as a framework, and I did receive informed consent from gatekeepers for almost all of the toddlers in the toddler room and assent from the participating toddlers themselves. (This is discussed further in Section 5.3.2). I only stopped filming if the few toddlers who did not have consent to participate were present and was able to continue filming even when the case study toddlers were not present. This was very valuable for my research as the non-case study toddlers often took part in highly relevant social interactions with each other that added important findings to my study. The pseudonyms and ages of the other participating toddlers is presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Table 2. Other participants from October to February

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at beginning of data collection October 2015	Age at middle of data collection February 2016
Susan	Girl	1 year 10 months	2 years 2 months
Andrea	Girl	2 years	2 years 4 months
Helgi	Boy	2 years 1 months	2 years 5 months
Maria	Girl	2 years 5 months	2 years 9 months

Table 3. Other participants from February to June

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at middle of data collection February 2016	Age at end of data collection June 2016
Birna	Girl	1 year 4 months	1 year 8 months
Gunnar	Boy	1 year 8 months	2 years
Simon	Boy	1 year 8 months	2 years
Ragnar	Boy	1 year 10 months	2 year 3 months
Hekla	Girl	2 year 2 months	2 year 6 months

In total, 14 of the 25 participating children ended up being part of the interactions in the three studies within this PhD project, 6 boys and 8 girls.

There were also four adults in the room, all women ranging in age from their late 20s to early 50s. The head teacher in the toddler room had an M.Ed. degree in ECEC; one adult had a secondary school diploma in ECEC; and two adults had no specific qualifications, although one of them had years of experience working with young children. The research project focused on the children and their interactions, but the adults were present during the study. I did ask them to try to behave and interact with the children as they would if I were not there, but I am aware that my presence in the room most likely influenced the situation to some degree. I will discuss the ethical considerations I kept in mind during the data collection period in regard to the adults in the room and my relationship with them, in Section 5.3.

5.1.3 Pilot study

It is beneficial to conduct a pilot study before starting a research project. This is a valuable tool for testing research methods and the research schedule to determine if the utilised methods are feasible and if any adjustments need to be made to ensure the success of the study (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). In September 2015, I conducted observations for one week, approximately two hours each day during the work week. During the pilot study, there were three issues I wanted to test and determine how to address. First, there were technical issues that come with using a video camera as a method to conduct participant observations, especially since this was the first time I ever conducted this type of research. Second, I was concerned with the ethical issues of being present and observing young children who are not always able to give clear consent of participation. This was very important to me as a reflexive and ethical researcher and connects strongly to my positionality as a researcher and my view of toddlers as holders of rights within the

guidelines of the UNCRC, which was discussed in Section 1.1. In Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, I discuss how I received informed consent from gatekeepers and elicited assent from the toddlers themselves. Third, I wanted to establish where and when were the best times to be in the toddler room in order to observe peer interactions that were initiated by the children and oriented towards them. For all of these issues, the pilot study was a success, although I also addressed these issues throughout the months I collected the data, reflecting on each day I was in the toddler room and adjusting my approach during the recorded sessions, positioning myself as a 'reflective' researcher (Berger, 2015).

The first issue I attempted was how to best use the video camera for the participant observations, figuring out the best strategies for positioning myself while recording in order to capture the interactions taking place in the toddler group. Should I remain at a distance and use the zoom function on the camera, or should I be closer to the children? Throughout the pilot study week, I also worked out some issues regarding the audio recordings. I did not receive a microphone until two months into the data collection due to delays and issues with customs regulations, so I needed to make do with the microphone on the camera. The quality of the audio was a concern throughout the pilot data collection period, and indeed through my main data collection period as well, but I was able to work with the audio I captured. The fact that I was focusing on embodied, non-verbal interactions, made it so that this problem did not impact my findings significantly.

Second, after the pilot study week, I was able to reflect on certain ethical issues that were concerning, for example, where to position the camera and how to react and adjust when/if the presence of the camera was noticed by the toddlers. I knew from the onset that I did not want to hide the camera from them; I wanted them to be able to see that I was filming them. However, I was also aware that their seeing the camera might be a distraction, interfering with their interactions with other toddlers and adults. As a novice researcher, I was concerned that I would not be able to capture 'naturally' occurring interactions. However, this turned out to be no cause for concern. Throughout the pilot study and the entire data collection period, the toddlers did indeed approach the camera and notice my recording them. Although they asked me about it and wanted to look through the camera lens, they also went about their day, interacting with each other, playing and were seemingly unconcerned about the camera. In Sheila Degotardi's (2011) words, I became the 'camera lady', someone the toddlers noticed and approached from time to time and identified as an 'atypical adult' (Corsaro, 2017).

During the pilot study, I became aware of the third issue I had not previously considered. This was regarding the structure of the day in the toddler room and the different activities in which the children would participate. Initially, I had intended to video record interactions in the peer group throughout the different activities of the daily routines in the toddler room. However, during the pilot study, I realised that free play sessions allowed the toddlers the most freedom to interact with their peers. During more structured

and teacher led activities, toddlers' bodies were more controlled. They were often expected to sit on chairs or in a circle, and embodied interactions were often discouraged and seen as distractions from the activity itself. Therefore, I readjusted my initial data collection plan and focused on free play sessions, both inside the setting and outside on the playground where I would be able to focus on self-initiated and child-directed interactions between peers.

The pilot study was successful in that it helped me organise and plan my data collection and clarified some technical, ethical and analytical issues. Some of issues I was able to fix and adjust to immediately, while other issues were present during all of the data collection period. However, I do feel confident that the data I gathered was adequate for the analysis needed for this research project and provides valuable insights into the activities in this particular toddler peer group.

5.1.4 Participant observations through video recordings

The main method of data collection for this research project was video observation (video ethnography) of social interactions in the peer group. The observations were 'child-initiated and directed' (Greig et al., 2013; p. 252), that is, I followed the case study toddlers around for a period each day and did not instruct them or manipulate them into acting in a certain manner. The observations took place in their natural setting, and I followed the timetable of the toddler room, so the toddlers would have been involved in the same activity regardless of my presence. The data were collected over a period of 9 months, from August 2015 to June 2016. The pilot study was conducted during the first two months, and from October to June, I collected the data for the research project itself. During this period, I accumulated more than 50 hours of video recordings.

I chose to use a video camera to record the observations in the setting, because I felt that would give me the best opportunity to analyse in detail what the toddlers were doing while they were interacting with their peers. Harvey Sacks (1989a) explains that we use observations to 'describe methods persons use in doing social life' (p. 21). With the inductive approach of multimodal conversation analysis, observations through the use of video camera provided the opportunity to rewatch the interactions repeatedly. In addition, using a small hand-held video camera enabled me to follow the toddlers more closely and let them dictate where and what was recorded. Video recordings also make it possible to examine the embodied interactions that young children use to communicate, and through detailed analysis, gain an understanding of orderly social action that is often hidden underneath apparently chaotic social interactions (Danby, 2021; Mondada, 2018).

The use of video ethnography has become quite common in research with young children, and numerous studies on embodied social interactions in the peer group have used this method (e.g. Alcock, 2012); Cekaite, 2016; Engdahl, 2011; M.H. Goodwin & Cekaite, 2025; Greve, 2005; Johansson & Emilson, 2010; Kidwell, 2009; Løkken, 2010;

Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016; Pursi, 2019; Rutanen, 2007). All these studies attest to the value video ethnography brings to research with young children.

Data collection typically took place during free play sessions, both inside and outside, and usually in the mornings. The toddlers were mostly well rested, and the attendance was more stable than in the afternoon when some of the toddlers would be sleeping or had been picked up by their parents. I would either follow one of the case study toddlers for about 20 minutes before switching to another toddler, or I would sit in a corner and observe the nearby toddlers. Doing so helped me obtain the most 'unmotivated' data (Bateman & Church, 2017b). After a while, through my reflexivity as a researcher, I found that I needed to be an 'interested' observer (Johansson, 2011) with a 'generous' approach (Stephenson, 2011) during my visits to the toddler room. This meant that I made myself available to the toddlers, but I did not initiate any interaction and tried not to interfere. Although I tried to remain 'invisible' and unobtrusive to get as close to naturalistic data as possible, I expected that the toddlers would approach me or 'use' me as one of the adults in the room, especially as they became accustomed to seeing me in the setting. I further hoped that they would be happy about me recording them, and I carefully assessed potential signs that they were feeling uncomfortable or unhappy about the filming. I was somewhat successful within these roles. The toddlers did approach me and tried to determine what I was doing there since I was not acting like one of the teachers. This included breaking the rules in front of me to see how I would react; inviting me to play; or asking me for assistance when there was conflict or they needed help with something. This corresponds to other research results with young children (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016), highlighting the need for ethical reflexivity on the part of the researcher, as well as in the relational aspects of the role.

Prior to the fieldwork and data collection period, I had extensively researched how I would be able to video record the setting. Charles Goodwin's (1993) writing on video observations in a natural setting was very beneficial and his experience, advice and explanations about how to go about the often-complicated process of video recording was very valuable to me during my planning period. I also discussed this matter with my supervisors and other people I knew had used video ethnography in their research.

The recording equipment I used was a Sony handycam HD video recorder and a Sony Bluetooth wireless microphone. I uploaded the videos to a PC and edited them with Windows Movie Maker, but after a few months I acquired a MacBook Pro and started using iMovie for editing. At the time, I did not have easy access to the IT department at Waikato University, as I conducted the data collection in Iceland. I had also thought that I would be returning to New Zealand after the data collection and had not prepared for the eventuality of not going back and how that would impact the analysis of the data. I therefore used my personal laptops and affordable software to watch and edit the video clips. I secured the video data on an external hard drive that was password protected and kept in a locked drawer when not in use. I also kept the field notes notebooks and consent

forms from the gatekeepers in this locked drawer. After I transferred to the University of Iceland, I moved the video data and digitalised field notes to One Drive as instructed by the graduate school and deleted all the data on the hard drive. I still keep the consent forms from the gatekeepers in a locked drawer and will destroy those after the PhD is finished, according to the ethical standards of the University of Iceland.

The procedures used when editing involved identifying clips where the toddlers were interacting with their peers through embodied means and then cutting the videos down to shorter clips and watching them at different speeds to catch as much as possible of what was happening. This process evolved significantly during the data analysis process, especially since I was analysing the data for several years. The field of multimodal EMCA has evolved greatly in the last decade which corresponds to the duration of this PhD research project. What I had read and learned in 2016 when I started the data analysis (e.g. Bateman, 2011, 2015; Cekaite, 2016; Filipi, 2009; Kidwell, 2009; Mondada, 2007, 2016), is different from what I had read and learned in 2025 when the data analysis was finished (Bateman, 2022, 2025; Bateman & Church, 2017; Cekaite & Mondada, 2021a; De Stefani & Mondada, 2018; Mondada, 2018, 2019). The learning curve for me, as a novice ethnomethodological ethnographer, was steep. As an ECEC teacher, I was used to pedagogical documentation which is a tool for teachers to make the cognitive processes of children visible (Rinaldi, 2021) while in multimodal EMCA, the focus is on making observable the actions, not the thought (Bateman, 2015).

In addition, I had a technical problem connected with the use of the microphone and, as a result, the audio of the video clips is not always very good. I was unable to fix this problem during the data collection period, but I remain confident that the data collected are valid and useful when examining social interactions in a peer group of mostly pre-verbal children, since the project's focus is on embodied interactions rather than spoken conversations. Through repeated watching of the video clips, through discussions with my supervisors, through attending data sharing labs and conferences, I do believe that my analysis and interpretations of the data is of quality and correctly represents what the participating toddler themselves were indeed doing.

Although I did have a hand-held camera that was easy to move around, I found that it was usually the least intrusive of me to stay in one place when I was filming. I would situate myself close to the toddlers and then stay there for at least 20 minutes with the camera. As I only had one camera, and mostly stayed in place while filming, I know that there were several embodied interactive strategies that I missed, some of which included the toddlers' gaze. One or more of the toddlers would often have their backs towards me, and so I would not be able to video their face. For future research, having two cameras as opposite angles is something I will definitely be looking into for this type of research. In these instances, I used 'secondary evidence', such as head movement, speech or/and vocalisation, and the reactions of the other toddlers as suggested by Kidwell (2005) as indicators of gaze direction, as well as my field notes.

5.1.5 Field notes

Throughout my time in the ECEC setting, I also used ethnographic field notes as a means of data collection, as this is valuable in reflexive research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is important to note though, that within CA research, field notes are not considered valid as a data collection method in themselves (Rawls & Lynch, 2024). They are, however, an accepted method to use alongside video or audio recordings, to aid in the presentation of the "member's point of view" (Rawls & Lynch, 2024, 135). I would write notes about what I saw, what I felt, and early ideas related to the analysis. These notes were recorded both during and after each day of data collection and helped me reflect on the data and on the interactions I had witnessed. This process also aided in how I would proceed in the following days and weeks, because I could identify through my reflections what had gone well and what had not gone as well. It was beneficial for me to both identify and remember instances of embodied interactions that I thought might be valuable to my findings. I would therefore note dates and times of day that I could then use when I was watching the video recordings. I had a great deal of video recordings so noting down specific instances where I had witnessed a particularly illustrative case of embodied interactions was extremely helpful throughout the analysis period. It was also helpful, as I experienced some technical difficulties in the first weeks of the data collection period, and the field notes, therefore, helped me understand what had been happening in the interaction I had recorded. This was especially beneficial in regard to the analysis of the toddlers' gaze and vocalisation. I noted down who had been watching whom, where they had been looking, and what the toddlers had said to each other, to a teacher or to me, if anything. Because I mostly chose to stay in one place as I was filming, I knew I would not be able to record everyone's gaze direction, so writing notes was crucial for the analysis. I also had technical issues with the audio, so the field notes provided an extra layer of data that I was able to turn to if I did not catch what the toddlers were saying in the video clips. Even though this was helpful in many instances, it did not always aid me as I did not write down everything I saw. I wanted to be present and available to the toddlers when I was in the room with them, so I sometimes put away the notebook.

In the analysis stage, the field notes boosted the emerging understanding of how I could understand the data (Emerson et al., 2011). During the data analysis, I focused on reoccurring embodied interactions captured in the recordings, identifying what the participating toddlers repeatedly did in order to initiate interactions with their peers. Examining the field notes from each day, I gained a deeper understanding of the mood within the toddler group during each recording, the actions of other children and teachers not captured in the recordings, and what happened before and after the recordings. The field notes, therefore, provided a valuable insight into developing an understanding of the embodied strategies I chose to focus on during the analysis.

5.2 Data analysis

Video observations were employed to identify different embodied strategies used by toddler-aged children to interact with their peer group. The video data were analysed in depth using multimodal conversation analysis.

5.2.1 Collections of conversational phenomena

Through multimodal conversation analysis, I examined toddlers' social interactions by examining how they communicated what was important to them and their peers. It was unknown what I would be observing or how it would be of use in this research project. Things also happen quickly in the toddler peer group, and valuable information could easily have escaped my notice had I not already been recording. Due to this, I accumulated a great deal of data, around 50 hours of video recordings. After hours of watching the video recordings and with the help of my field notes where I had noted dates and time of instances that I found especially interesting, I made an initial selection of the video clips with occurrences where the participating toddlers demonstrated a specific interest to interact with peers through their multimodal actions. The criteria used for selecting the video clips was, first, that there were peer-peer interactions going on, and second, that what I saw seemed to be important to the toddlers themselves. The best way to understand what is important to such young children is to look for repetitions in interactions and shared routines, which signal phenomena they value and look for in their social relationships with their peers (Bateman, 2011). I remained mindful of the main research question, *how do toddlers initiate and participate in interactions within their peer group?,* throughout the data analysis period. In total, I had 9 hours, 47 minutes and 4 seconds of video clips relevant to my research project, showcasing peer-peer interactions in various situations, although mostly in free play session in the morning hours.

After this initial selection of video clips, I was able to "build collections of instances of particular conversational phenomena" with the aim to "produce analysis of patterns in the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 88). Again, these patterns were recurring, the toddlers oriented to these particular conversational phenomena repeatedly. The patterns included touch, gaze, smile, humour, vocalisations, imitation, to name the most common ones. The second step was to transcribe the patterns, which was the start of the analysis itself. I discuss the transcriptions process in more detail in chapter 5.2.2, but throughout the transcription process, I was conducting a simple proto-analysis (Mondada, 2025). Detailed transcription of video recordings is a slow process where the analysist needs to go back and forth from the video to the transcription, which inevitably leads to the start of the data analysis itself. In addition, through the detailed oriented approach of the transcription, noticing different 'conversational phenomena' became evident. In the third step, I then returned to the video data and looked for more patterns I had identified and transcribed

(Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). In total, I had 56 different video clips that showcased these particular conversational phenomena the participating toddlers oriented towards.

Each of my published articles accompanying this thesis focused on different collections of phenomena. The examples I chose to use in each article were the type of interactions that were typical of the interactions I found in the video recordings, that it, the 'conversational phenomena' witnessed in these cases were recurrent and frequent within peer-peer interactions in this peer group. They were also particularly illustrative cases that exceptionally demonstrated the conversational phenomena under study. I discuss each article in greater detail in Chapter 6, but the main points from each are as follows: In Article I, I examined gaze, smile and touch and how they act as 'adjacency pairs' in an initiation of an interaction. For Article I, I selected the three examples from a collection of 12 video clips that showed a clear representation of how the participants used gaze and touch as a strategy for initiating interactions. In Article II, I explored how embodied humorous interactions help toddlers build a sense of togetherness within the peer group. Humour was a very common interactive strategy the toddlers used, both to initiate an interaction as well as to build momentum within an interaction, and I had over 40 clips where humour was present, 18 of them being quite illustrative. I chose the examples I use in the article because I wanted to highlight the outdoor environment and how humorous interactions evolve throughout a single play session – the examples I used represented this well. Article III, focused on embodied participation through observation and imitation. Gaze/observation was a communicative strategy that was always present, all of the toddlers would watch, make eye-contact or simply observe at one time or another. In Article III, I pair observation with imitation, and I selected the examples from 9 video clips that were all very illustrative and where the toddlers' gaze was clearly visible in the video data or clearly indicated in my field notes. The patterned phenomena I identified and analysed are interconnected and overlapping, but constructing these collections made it possible for me to organise the data and focus on examining certain interaction sequences, which then continued to occur throughout the transcription process.

5.2.2 Transcription and sketches

When working with video recordings as the data, presenting the data in written form can be complicated and in CA there are certain conventions of transcription that should be followed in order for the data to be understood by other CA researchers. Transcription conventions in CA were developed by Gail Jefferson (Sacks et al., 1974; Jefferson, 2004) and these conventions are currently still used to transcribe talk-in-interaction. With the development of multimodal CA, transcribing interactions became more detailed (Mondada, 2025). Jefferson had developed ways to transcribe certain non-spoken elements of interactions, such as laughter, repair and overlap, but in the last decade or so, Lorenza Mondada (2016, 2018, 2019, 2025) has led the development of nuanced and highly accurate transcriptions conventions that capture the complicated ways people

interact through spoken and non-spoken means. The conversation analysis symbols used in this research project to describe the data are adapted from Jefferson's conventions (Jefferson, 2004a, 2004b; Sacks et al., 1974) as well as from the updated conventions regarding multimodal conversation analysis developed by Mondada (2018).

Below are the symbols used in the three studies of this research project.

* *	Delimits descriptions of embodied movements made by Vera
Δ Δ	Delimits descriptions of embodied movements made by Harry
++	Delimits descriptions of embodied movements made by Maria
⊥ ⊥	Delimits descriptions of embodied movements made by Susan
· ·	Delimits descriptions of embodied movements made by Andrea
*–>	Described action continues across subsequent lines
–>*	Described action continues until the same symbol is reached
>>	Described action begins before the extract's beginning
:	Prolonged syllable
::	Lengthening of the prior sound, with more or less colons used to represent longer or shorter lengthening, respectively
↓ ↑	A falling intonation in speech and a rising intonation in speech
°degree sign°	Either side of a word indicates that it is spoken in a quiet, soft tone
$dollar$	Dollar signs indicate the talk was in a smile voice
fig	Indicates the exact moment when a screen shot was taken
((*brackets*))	Indicates unspoken actions
(0.5)	Indicates pause length in seconds
Bold	Indicates heavy emphasis or shouting

The majority of the interactions examined were non-verbal although some vocalisation (otherwise termed 'non-lexical items' in CA) was used and a few words were uttered by some of the toddlers. All of the interactions were transcribed manually using the above conventions and the few utterances were transcribed verbatim, with the word in Icelandic followed by the English translation. The method of transcribing developed throughout the data analysis and writing of the three articles as I became more experienced at transcribing. The symbols used in Articles I and II are identical, from Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions, but in Article III, I added symbols in accordance with Mondada's (2018) conventions as my transcription developed, and as the transcription conventions in the field developed.

In addition to transcribing the interactions, I also used sketches to show what was happening within the interactions. Transcribing embodied interactions or multimodality (Mondada, 2018), can be complicated, and even the most detailed transcription may not reveal the full picture. Presenting the interaction in both textual form as well as in iconic form, i.e. through sketches or screenshots, is a useful way of deepening the description

(C. Goodwin, 1993; M. H. Goodwin, 1980; Mondada, 2018). This is also very valuable when presenting CA research to non-CA readers, as at one of the three articles was published in early childhood (non-CA) journals.

The process for creating the sketches used in the articles was threefold. First, screenshots were taken of the video clips being analysed. These were numerous, and I ultimately chose several screenshots I hoped would best present the interactions for each article. The second step included creating the sketches themselves. I used GIMP 2.10.36, which is a free, open-source image editing software. After creating the sketches I needed, the third step involved editing the sketches in Microsoft Paint, which involved inserting names and/or hiding the faces of the toddlers. Conducting research with young children, protecting their privacy as well as understanding whether they have assented to being video recorded is a complicated issue. I now turn to a discussion of the ethical considerations necessary when conducting research with young children.

5.3 Ethical considerations

This doctoral research began at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, and the original ethical approval for this research was given from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Waikato. The ethical approval form can be seen in Appendix A. When I moved the study to the University of Iceland in 2017, I was informed that I did not need to reapply for ethical approval at the University of Iceland since I was a registered PhD student at Waikato during the data collection period. In addition, in 2018, the data protection laws were changed in Iceland (Lög um persónuvernd og vinnslu persónuupplýsinga nr. 90/2018) but because the data collection for this study was concluded in 2015 - 2016, I was permitted to follow the older laws from the year 2000 during the data collection period. The new regulations are much stricter concerning protection of privacy, and when writing the three articles, I abided by the newer regulations since I wrote the articles after the revised laws went into effect. Furthermore, from 2016, I followed the ethical guidelines of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) during the data analysis period as well as while writing the articles (Bertram et al., 2016). In 2025, the updated EECERA ethical code was published, and it became my guide from then hence (Bertram et al., 2025).

As the main participants were very young children, several ethical issues had to be addressed before starting the research process. According to the 12th paragraph of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), children have a right to be listened to, and their views and opinions should be taken into consideration when dealing with issues that concern them. This can, however, be difficult and challenging when very young children are concerned (Einarsdóttir, 2007b). There is a need to showcase their competence and broadcast their voices while it is also important to protect them from harm (Kristinsdóttir & Árnadóttir, 2015). There are, therefore, several gatekeepers that need to be approached before a researcher can begin collecting data.

Gatekeepers are "those people who attempt to safeguard the interests of others and who can give formal or informal permission for research to proceed" (Greig et al., 2013, p. 257). In this case, there were five different gatekeepers, as well as the University of Waikato Research Ethics Committee. First, there was the Icelandic Data Protection Authority (IDPA), which is a national organisation concerned with the Protection of Privacy Act No.77 as well as the new regulation from 2018 (Lög um persónuvernd og meðferð persónuupplýsinga nr. 77/2000; Lög um persónuvernd og vinnslu persónuupllýsinga nr. 90/2018). The IDPA letter can be found in Appendix B. Second, I informed the Office of School and Family Affairs at the municipality council and received permission from the director of ECEC services to approach the setting formally. The third and fourth gatekeepers were the manager of the setting and the teachers in the toddler room. As I was familiar with most of the teachers and staff in the toddler room, certain ethical issues needed to be addressed related to my positionality as an insider researcher.

As I mentioned in chapter 5.1.1, I had a previous relationship with the ECEC setting where I conducted the data collection. I had worked there previously and worked in a different room during the data collection, and therefore I would position myself as an insider researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I was known to the teachers and staff as an ECEC teacher doing research. My previous relationships with the teachers and staff in the toddler room was an important factor in them consenting to participate in the study. This is something I felt throughout the data collection period, and it was something I often found difficult to navigate. I tried my best to build rapport and trust between myself and the adult participants (Lichtman, 2013), encouraging them to let me know if I was intruding as well as reassuring them that I was not there to judge or showcase their abilities or mistakes they made as teachers and educators. I do believe that I was successful in this regard but at the same time I recognise that I did hold certain power over my participants as not only an ECEC teacher but a PhD student and researcher. They wanted me to succeed in my PhD and therefore may have found it difficult to decline to participate. Although I was an insider in the setting, I was also an outsider as a PhD researcher, and this positionality was tricky to navigate at times. The teachers would often include me in pedagogical discussions that took place in the toddler room or discuss certain activities or plans they had. I was also left alone with the children a few times, indicating that the teachers/staff saw me as one of them. This was then juxtaposed with me not interfering when I saw my participating toddlers break the rules or test the boundaries of what was allowed, such as eating sand. Sometimes these instances also left me feeling confused as to my own role within the setting during data collection hours. This is not uncommon in qualitative research where data is collected in the field and it is important to keep deconstructing and reflecting on these issues as researchers (Bukamal, 2022; Auburn et al., 2021).

I discuss my *reflexivity* as a researcher in chapter 1.1 and there I state that throughout the data collection period I was continuously navigating my role as a participant observer in the toddler room, and I believe that I was successful in approaching the adult participants

in an ethical and respectful manner, to the best of my ability at the time, as well as continuously reflecting on my role. This is something I believe I will be doing for the rest of my career as a researcher in ECEC.

The fifth gatekeepers were the parents of the children in the toddler room. Initially, I approached the manager through email and later met with her and the head teacher of the toddler room, informing them about the research project and giving them the information letter and consent form. The head teacher in the toddler room distributed the information letters and consent forms to the parents as well as to the staff in the room.

5.3.1 Informed consent for gatekeepers

All gatekeepers received the information letter describing the aims and objectives of the research, what I planned to do and how, as well as a description of how I would attempt to safeguard the children's privacy and well-being. They were then asked to sign an informed consent form. For there to be informed consent, the gatekeepers and/or participants must have been informed fully about the nature of the research, what they were expected to do within the study, and whether there were any risks to participating. They were further informed that they could refuse to participate and withdraw from the study at any time. It was also explained to the gatekeepers how the data collected would be used (MacNaughton et al., 2010). The information letters and consent forms can be found in Appendices C - F. Within the group of 29 children, only four of the parents did not give consent for them to participate. I made sure to keep the video camera away from these four children and stopped filming if they came into the frame of the camera. This was not an issue throughout the data collection period. The children that did not have parental consent, were older than the main participants and because the toddlers in the room where usually separated into two groups, the younger and the older toddlers, these children were almost never in the room while I was filming. On the rare occasion that they were, I took care to be subtle when stopping the filming. It was common for me to start and stop the filming through the sessions, so I feel confident that the children did not notice anything amiss. I was friendly towards them and made sure to talk to them and make eye contact, even if they were not participants in the research.

In addition to being asked to provide informed consent, parents were also given an option to have either their child's name or a pseudonym used in the thesis and in future publications. I tried to make it clear that I was not able to promise total confidentiality or anonymity to all participants simply because the study took place in a small community, where everyone knows everyone. Most of the parents asked for pseudonyms for their children, and ultimately, I decided to use pseudonyms for all the children to safeguard their privacy. I also used sketches, not photographs, in the analysis and transcription of the data for the same purpose. Some of the parents did not want their child's face to be visible in publications, and in the sketches where those children were visible, their faces were covered with a grey circle.

5.3.2 Toddler participants assent/dissent

The view of the toddler presented in this study is of a competent social actor capable of sophisticated communication and interactions in the peer group, but that does not negate the fact that young children are also very vulnerable (Johansson & Emilson, 2010). As the participants were indeed very young, they were not able to give informed consent on whether or not they wanted to participate. I did, however, try to continuously negotiate their *assent* throughout the data collection period. There were a few instances where a toddler clearly indicated their dissent to participate. One instance is when I was filming and had placed the wireless microphone on the windowsill close by. One of the toddlers kept giving me the microphone, even though I kept putting it back. After this happening three times, I put down the camera and just sat there observing the play that was going on. This particular toddler than proceeded to include me in the play. I understood this as the toddler finding that the microphone and camera were distracting me from the play that they wanted me to participate in. At this point in the data collection (this happened in November), my stance as a researcher changed from observer to 'interested observer' (Johansson, 2011) with a 'generous approach' (Stephenson, 2011), as I discuss briefly in chapter 5.1.4. This was a natural progression for me as I noticed instances as the one I describe here above. The children often wanted me to take part in their play and as a rule, I accepted their invitations.

From an ethical standpoint, I felt that this was an important role for me to take. I was in the toddlers' space, where they spent several hours a day and that was theirs. I was a guest. I therefore felt I needed to respond favourably to their invitations to play and interact, and that generally took precedence over my need to film and document for my research purposes. Conducting research with very young children not only raises ethical considerations, but it also requires relationships and interactions with the children, who may not understand why you are there and what you are doing (Pálmadóttir et al., 2018). This places the responsibility on the researcher to continuously reflect on the research process; my use of reflexivity during the data collection process as well as during later stages of the research helped me remain ethical and considerate of the young research participants. I also had time. The fact that I was going to be in the toddler room one week a month for a whole academic year, gave me time and space to do this without feeling that it would have a negative effect on the quantity or quality of the data I was collecting.

As previously mentioned, I used the first two months of the data collection period (August and September 2015) to familiarise myself with the toddler room, the teachers and the toddlers, focusing on having positive interactions with all the toddlers. Having extensive experience working with young children, I was confident that I would be able to achieve this within the two-month period, and I feel that it was managed well. Within the two-month period, I conducted a pilot study, as discussed in Section 5.1.3. The approaches used also added to the overall trustworthiness of the research project.

5.4 Trustworthiness of the research

When evaluating the quality of a qualitative research project, the term 'trustworthiness' has been adopted instead of the more quantitative terms of reliability and validity (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The question is whether we can trust that the data are presented in a reliable manner through the analysis and discussion and that sound conclusions are drawn.

The trustworthiness of the research is connected to how the researcher conducts the study. In qualitative research, the aim is not to generalise over a larger population nor to be 'objective' as researchers (Lichtman, 2013). I have previously discussed my personal use of *reflexivity,* but I was also aware of the fact that I was an outsider in the toddler room and that simply by being there, I changed the context for the toddlers. They would test me to see what I would do and act in certain instances, as if to see whether I was a teacher or not. For example, some of the toddlers would eat sand in front of me in the outdoor area, or they would use play material in a way that caused noise, usually resulting in a teacher coming and enforcing appropriate use of the play materials. I had decided that I would not be interfering unless I thought someone would get hurt, which never happened. I only participated in the activities of the toddlers when they directly invited me in, by talking to me, asking me questions or showing me things. Throughout the data collection period, as well as in the data analysis stage, I tried to be aware of the impact I had on the toddlers' interactions, and thus, the 'video data'. The detailed transcriptions of these interactions through the methods of conversation analysis provide a level of transparency to the findings, and the detailed transcription, displays what participants were actually doing.

In order for a study to be trustworthy, it is important to present the data in a clear manner, show the analysis and draw conclusions that are based on the data and the theoretical context of the research. In this research project, I examined a certain context and what was happening within that context, and I presented the data as clearly and truthfully as possible, relating the story of the social interactions within the particular peer group of toddlers who participated in the study. Throughout the duration of the research project, I participated in data sharing sessions with other CA researchers through the Child Interaction Group organised at Linköping University in Sweden. Here I was able to discuss data and get valuable input from more experienced researchers within the field of multimodal CA. I also presented the data at a data sharing session with CA researchers through UCLA, headed by Marjorie Goodwin. This data sharing within the EMCA community was a valuable tool for ensuring trustworthiness of the research (Bateman, 2025). Furthermore, I shared the findings of the three studies at numerous national and international conferences throughout 2021 to 2025, which helped develop my analysis and thought processes throughout the progression of the analysis, as well as publish the three articles that this overall PhD project is based upon in international peer-reviewed

research journals. All of these steps have contributed to the trustworthiness of the research.

5.5 Summary

Chapter 5 highlights the methods used in this research project. The methodological approach used is multimodal conversation analysis, which is suitable for highlighting children's perspectives through their interactions. The study was an ethnographic case study using participant observations through video recordings and field notes. Ethical considerations included informed consent from all gatekeepers and continuous negotiation of assent from the participating toddlers. Trustworthiness was ensured through clear presentation of data, reflexivity and data sharing within the research community. The analysis focused on identifying and transcribing patterns of embodied interactions, such as gaze, touch, humour and imitation, using CA conventions and sketches to illustrate the findings. We will now turn to a discussion on the findings from each of the published articles as well as how the findings can be integrated.

6 Overview of findings: Toddler sociality

This research project aimed to deepen the understanding of embodied interactions in the toddler peer group within an ECEC setting in Iceland. The specific focus was on the different embodied strategies toddler aged children use to initiate and participate in peer interactions. Three sub-studies were conducted within the research project, each focusing on embodied interactions, as can be seen in Table 4 below. Chapter 6 presents an overview of the main findings as well as the results of each of the sub-studies published in the three articles accompanying this thesis. The findings are organised into three sections, in the order of the articles published, each answering one of the sub-research questions. In the last section, I summarise the findings of each article and answer the main research questions.

Table 4. Overview of the three articles.

Articles	Research question	Key findings
Article I	W*hat embodied strategies do toddlers use to initiate an interaction with their peers?*	1) Gaze and touch as initiation strategies 2) Gaze, smile, touch are an 'adjacency trio' 3) Joint attention is crucial for meaningful embodied interactions 4) Repair is common
Article II	*How do toddlers orient to embodied humour in their initiation of peer interactions?*	1) Gaze, vocalisation and humour as initiation strategies 2) Humour as a recruitment tool and to explore social norms 3) Environmental resources can support social interactions
Article III	*How do toddlers use observing and imitating as embodied as a pre-opening in the peer group?*	1) Observing as a pre-opening 2) Imitating as a pre-opening 3) Toddlers' showcase their sociality through competent use of embodied actions to indicate their interest to interact with peers

6.1 Article I – Initiating interactions in the toddler peer group: Embodied conversation starters

The first article, co-authored with my main supervisor, Amanda Bateman, was published in the journal, *Research on Children and Social Interactions*, see (Gunnarsdóttir & Bateman, 2022). In this article, we answered the research question: W*hat embodied strategies do toddlers use to initiate an interaction with their peers?*

In the article, we focused on initiation of an interaction between two toddlers through embodied strategies, particularly gaze and touch. Other CA conversational strategies, such as repair and adjacency pairs, were also examined. The key findings were fourfold: 1) The article showcased that the participating toddlers were skilled at the embodied strategies of gaze and touch to initiate an interaction with a peer. 2) Certain embodied strategies, such as gaze and touch, were interconnected and acted as adjacency pairs, often with a smile as a bridge between the two, forming an 'adjacency trio'. 3) Joint attention is a significant factor in embodied interactions, as it provides a shared understanding of what is going on within the interactions. 4) The participating toddlers were able to read the social cues of their peers and repair their actions accordingly. They adjusted their responses based on how the peer reacted, such as changing the force of their touch or moving their body in different directions.

The findings of Article I provide a unique contribution to the field of ECEC and multimodal EMCA, as they reveal the socially competent ways in which toddlers use these specific resources to co-construct interactions with their peers, even at such a young age. The findings align with previous studies that showcase toddlers as active, competent social agents who use complicated embodied interactive actions to navigate their peer relationships. The article contributes to the ongoing literature on toddler peer interactions by demonstrating how toddlers co-construct their social worlds through these embodied interactions and how they identify different embodied social cues from their peers. The findings emphasise the importance of qualified educators who are able to recognise and support these interactions within the toddler peer group.

6.2 Article II – Moments of togetherness: Humour and playful interactions in the toddler peer group

The second article was co-authored with my main supervisor, Amanda Bateman, and published in the journal, *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, see (Gunnarsdóttir & Bateman, 2024). In this article, we answered the research question: *How do toddlers orient to embodied humour in their initiation of peer interactions?*

In the article, we investigated how toddlers use humour to engage in playful interactions with their peers, promoting a sense of togetherness and a 'mutual we' within the peer group.

The key findings from the article are that 1) The participating toddlers showed their social competence through using different embodied strategies, such as gaze, vocalisation and humour, to initiate interactions and to join a participation framework. 2) Humour in toddler peer groups is demonstrated to act as both a recruitment tool and a means to explore social norms within their environment. 3) The interaction between the toddlers on the ladybug seesaw highlights the importance of environmental resources that support social interactions in the play area of ECEC settings.

The findings of Article II make an important contribution to the overall discussion on the significance of the peer group to toddlers. The findings also provide a deep dive into toddler humour and the skilful ways toddlers demonstrate incongruence as a social resource for peer interactions. In addition, the findings denote that teachers can deepen their knowledge and inform their practices by understanding the importance of humour within toddler peer interactions as well as the significance of play materials in the environment that support interactions and social play. By encouraging these humorous interactions and play activities, teachers can give crucial support that enriches social interactions and helps build a sense of togetherness within the toddler peer group. Encouraging and supporting humorous play and interactions can foster toddler agency and participation in social play and interactions within their peer group.

6.3 Article III – Observing and imitating as a pre-opening: Exploring toddler sociality in the peer group

The third article was co-authored with two of my supervisors, Hrönn Pálmadóttir and Amanda Bateman, and is currently in the peer review process for publication in an international research journal. The research question focused on in this article was: *How do toddlers use observing and imitating as a pre-opening in the peer group?*

This article examines how toddlers use embodied actions of observing and imitating to indicate their interest in an ongoing participation framework and how they are pivotal in showcasing toddler sociality. Participation in the toddler peer group is dynamic and involves a range of different embodied actions. Central to gaining access to an ongoing participation framework are certain bodily alignments signalling a co-operative stance, which are necessary for successful interactions. We explored participation as active and relational, recognising that observation of others' play and subsequent imitation, is demonstrably active participation.

The findings contribute a unique outlook on how toddlers use embodied actions to effectively navigate the peer group. 1) Through observation, toddlers actively interact and indicate their interest to join an ongoing participation framework. 2) Imitation is an interactive action showcasing toddlers' interest to engage through their 'reuse with transformation' (Goodwin, 2018) of peers' actions. 3). The article stresses the competency of toddlers in using embodied actions to engage with their peers and adds

valuable knowledge to the field of ECEC. By showcasing these interactions, we hope that ECEC researchers and educators can better value the role of embodied interactions in toddler play. In addition, the article has contributed to and advanced the area of toddler sociality as well as showcasing multimodal conversation analysis as a research method to study toddler interactions in the peer group.

6.4 Integration of the findings

The overall research question for this PhD research project was: *How do toddlers initiate and participate in interactions with their peer group?* Through the three different articles, the findings indicate strongly that embodied strategies are crucial to interactions and the main form of initiations and early participation in joint activities within the peer group.

The findings connect clearly in that they all highlight *toddler sociality* through the highly structured embodied strategies the participating toddlers used to interact with their peers. This can be seen in Figure 2.

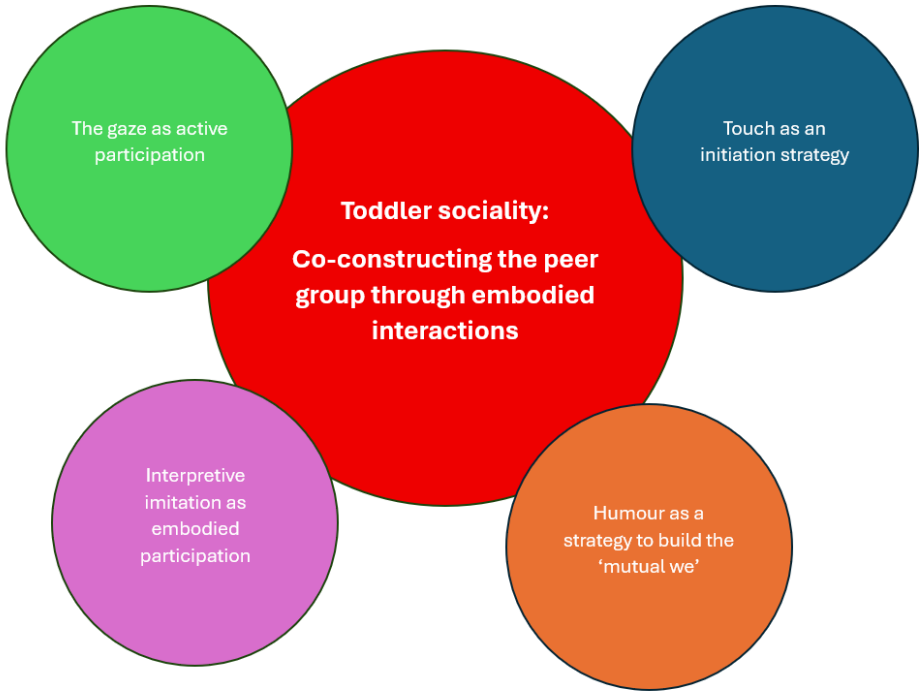

Figure 2. Integration of the findings

The participating toddlers were observably eager to interact with their peers, and they did so in highly structured ways, developing shared understanding, intersubjectivity and a 'mutual we'. One of the key embodied strategies the toddlers utilised was gaze. Gaze

functioned as a tool that the participating toddlers used to gain joint attention or acquire an understanding of what was occurring in an ongoing interaction. Gaze was an important first step in an interaction, and it built a foundation on which other embodied strategies, such as smile, touch, imitation, vocalisation and humour, followed. When the gaze was missing, the secondary strategies often went amiss, as there was no mutual understanding of what the action meant.

Another overall finding from the three articles highlighted the competency the participating toddlers showed in reading and understanding social interactive cues their peers expressed. By using the gaze, the act of observing, the toddlers demonstrated an acute responsiveness to the actions of the other children through their next turn and acted accordingly, sometimes repairing their initial interaction if the other toddler did not react positively. In some cases, this was not successful, which shows the importance of knowledgeable teachers to support toddlers in their social interactions.

When examining the overall findings for the study, two issues become clear: toddler sociality and the importance of the peer group. It was evident in the data from the beginning that the participating toddlers used multimodal strategies to initiate and sustain interactions with their peers; they used different embodied strategies to create a sense of togetherness and to showcase their sociality through engaging with each other in multimodal ways. *Toddlers' use of gaze as active participation in the peer group* was one of the main findings from this research project. The gaze was a crucial embodied strategy for their gaining an understanding of what was happening and how they were to respond. The importance of the gaze was consistent throughout the data, making this a valued strategy for the co-production of interactions among the toddlers. Another aspect of toddler sociality that was reoccurring in the data was *toddlers' use of imitation as participation in peer interactions*. They actively participated in an ongoing interaction by 'reusing with transformation' the actions of older peers, signalling their competence as play fellows and their clear interest to be included as full-fledged members of the peer group. These findings encompass *toddler sociality* and showcase toddlers as competent in co-creating the peer group through embodied interactions. The participating toddlers were adamant in their attempts to either initiate an interaction or join an ongoing interaction. Through different embodied strategies, the toddlers demonstrated a clear interest in creating moments of togetherness with their peers, a 'mutual we', thereby signalling and showcasing their sociality and their belonging to the peer group.

7 Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this PhD research project is to develop a deeper understanding of toddler sociality through examining embodied social interactions in the toddler peer group in an ECEC setting in Iceland. In previous chapters, the foundation of the research has been laid and in this chapter, the overall findings are discussed and conclusions drawn in relation to previous research conducted in the field. Thereafter, I reflect upon how the findings are important for early childhood education and care practice as well as the implications, limitations and strengths of the study. Finally, I discuss my recommendations for future research on social interactions in the toddler peer group within ECEC settings.

The overall findings will be presented in three categories: *toddlers' use of gaze as active participation in the peer group*; *toddlers' use of imitation as embodied participation in peer interactions*; and, finally, *toddler sociality*. Through these categories, I will explain and present a foundational aspect of *toddler sociality* that has the potential to inform practice as well as inspire future research within the field.

7.1 Toddlers' use of gaze as active participation in the peer group

The participating toddlers in this study used gaze as a social resource to interact with peers. Making eye contact was important for gaining joint attention, and an overall finding indicates that observation of others' actions was even more crucial. We can, for instance, see in Article III, that Vera's observation showcased her understanding of what she was seeing in the play of Maria and Andrea. Vera's use of observation and imitation signalled to the other children that she understood the play and could be a valuable playmate. She did this through using embodied access strategies, such as encirclement and imitation (Corsaro, 2017). Vera showcased that observation is a crucial step in social interaction and that through her observation, she was contributing to the context of the play and the social organisation of the peer group, an observable action of sociality (Levinson, 2006). In addition, in Article III, Vera observed Harry and what he was doing in response to what was happening in the play with Maria and Andrea. In the second article, observation is linked to excitement and humour and breaking the rules through sand eating, where humour was both used to communicate and to explore rules and boundaries of what is accepted (Loizou, 2004; Løkken, 2010).

One crucial component was observing an ongoing activity and gaining an understanding of what was happening within that activity or participation framework, which aligns with Goffman's (1981) work on the role of the observer. Observation is always regulated by the context in which it takes place, and in this instance, the act of observing can be

explained as 'focused interaction', with meaningful engagement where the act of looking is a crucial step in an interaction to know how to respond. The participating toddlers in this study demonstrated an understand of this, using observation to read the social cues within the interaction. Observing as an onlooker was a way for the participating toddlers to interpret nuanced behaviours and gazes of others (Kidwell, 2005) as well as engage in a type of 'silent negotiation' (Filipi, 2009) about what was happening within a certain participation framework with their peers. Their use of observation was also a way for them to position themselves as 'aspirant participants' (Monoco & Pontecorvo, 2010) through their role as the audience.

The toddlers in this study showed a clear interest to interact with certain peers over others, which aligns with previous research on toddler peer groups (Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2021; Greve, 2008) in which toddlers show preferences and seek out particular peers. It is also noteworthy that the participating toddlers used touch in tandem with observation. Gaze and touch were an adjacency pair (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Vera was especially competent in using observation as a 'noticing' (Kidwell, 2009) before touch, as we can see in her interaction with Susan in Article I. Through careful observation, Vera's touch changes from an interactive strategy to gain Susan's attention to an affective one as she uses touch to express her affection and comfort to Susan who was showing signs of being unhappy. This aligns with the findings of Ekström and Cekaite's (2024b) study in which toddlers do indeed use touch to comfort their peers. This is also a clear signalling of the value of 'care' which was of importance in the peer group (Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). The children seemed to care about each other. Vera's change in strategy from interaction to giving comfort is also an example of 'conversational repair' (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008), a strategy used in adult talk-in-interaction as well. Further, in Article I, Adam's repair of the strength of his stroke of Sandra's arm, is another example. It might be proposed that Vera and Harry's alignment with Maria and Andrea in Article III is a form of conversational repair, as they both change from 'phone' play to 'laughing' play in their imitation of Maria and Andrea's actions, signalling that they are not only observing what is going on in the play, but also participating in the collective behaviour. This displays an element of sociality (Enfield & Levinson, 2006a) and a change in the subject of their 'conversation' in line with Maria and Andrea.

Another instance of observation as active participation can be seen in Article I where Harry was sitting next to two girls who were playing together with dolls. In the article, the focus is on Simon's attempt to initiate an interaction with Harry, and how Harry did not accept that initiation. However, by looking at another aspect of that interaction, we can see that Harry was closely observing the play of the two girls. He was actively participating in their play through observation, as a bystander (Goffman, 1981), engaged in their participation framework (C. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). The girls had been having a conflict that they were slowly settling between themselves. Harry followed this closely and was actively engaged in observing the play of the girls and demonstrably reacted to

Simon's attempt as an intrusion to their interactive space, in line with what Corsaro (2017) saw in his research with older preschool children.

In Article II, Hekla and Simon had been observing the humorous play by Freyja, Birna and Gunnar, and they were able to join the participation framework by adding the affordance of the sand into the mix. This extends the humorous play into exploring boundaries and excitement (Loizou, 2005) as the children waited to see what Freyja, the notorious 'sand-eater' did. A close analysis of the transcription of this extract makes it observable that through their 'onlooker' status, both Hekla and Simon gained a clear understanding of what they could add to the play in order to be accepted by Freyja and Birna. Neither hesitated to add in the sand, as seen in the transcript; they were already active participants in the participation framework that was taking place. Hekla was a little reserved, as she waited to see the reactions of the other children, but there was no hesitation in the actual act of joining.

These findings highlight how toddlers actively used gaze as a meaningful strategy for participating in peer interactions. Rather than being passive onlookers, the toddlers observed their peers' social dynamics, interpreted intentions and engaged in what Goffman (1981) calls 'focused interaction', showcasing their sociality throughout. The findings from this current study provide a more nuanced perspective on findings from previous research that suggests that through the act of observing, a toddler is an active participant in an interaction (e.g. Engdahl, 2011; Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), challenging traditional views of toddlers as passive observers and supporting the idea that observation is a form of active social participation. In addition, the unique contribution of the study demonstrates toddler sociality through the competent ways they 'reuse with transformation' (C. Goodwin, 2018) as an interactive strategy with their peers.

7.2 Toddlers' use of imitation as embodied participation in peer interactions

Another major finding from this study is the competent ways the participating toddlers used imitation to initiate and join, or attempt to join, an ongoing participation framework with their peers. This use of imitation was interpretive and imaginative, a 'reuse with transformation' (C. Goodwin, 2018) of the previous acts of the other toddlers.

In Article I, we can see a very subtle act of imitation when Vera attempted to initiate an interaction by touching Sandra's arm in the same way she had observed Adam touch Sandra's arm a few seconds earlier and their subsequent interaction. Her observation of the interaction between Adam and Sandra had been focused and intense; in Goffman's (1981) words, she was a 'bystander' in the 'gathering' of the interaction between Adam and Sandra. Vera then took the next step in the attempted interaction by introducing touch. She attempted to participate in the 'collective behaviour' with her peers (Enfield

& Levinson, 2006a) and contribute to the 'social context' at the table they were sitting at (Levinson, 2006). Her initiation of the interaction was not accepted by Sandra, but it does showcase Vera's response to what was happening between Adam and Sandra. Through Vera's practical demonstration of interpreting the actions of Adam and reusing it through her act of imitation (C. Goodwin, 2018), she became an active participant in this particular 'gathering' or participation framework.

Another example of note from Article I, is Vera's mirroring of Susan's movements as she demonstrated her attempt to get Susan to respond to her initiation of an interaction. Susan moved a certain way, and Vera imitated her through reusing with transformation Susan's movements (C. Goodwin, 2018); their movements together become sort of a choreographed dance. Vera observably changes her approach as her initial attempt was not working, perhaps making it clear to Susan that she was interested in interacting but on Susan's terms. Here is another instance of conversational repair (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) being used in a highly competent way.

In Article II, the toddlers used imitation and humour to attempt to gain shared attention and to initiate interactions, as well as to create a sense of togetherness within the peer group. They used humour to send signals to another that they were willing to interact, for example through smiles and giggles. One toddler would smile, giggle and often vocalise, and the others would imitate, demonstrably making a choice to interact with certain peers over others (Engdahl, 2021). This was also a case of an adjacency pair (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) and could be seen on the seesaw, where Freyja jumped up and down, vocalising, and then stopping to gaze at Birna, who would then reproduce Freyja's actions. Sometimes they would also do this simultaneously. Gunnar did the same. He had been observing the girls, and when he joined the seesaw, he also jumped up and down and vocalised, suggesting he knew that this might work for him to be accepted into the participation framework. Gunnar's imitation was here an interactive strategy signalling engagement (Sacks, 1995).

The toddlers also imitated each other's humorous acts of laughter and silly embodied actions, such as eating sand. When Hekla and Simon added the sand to the middle of the seesaw, Freyja took her place as the 'sand-eater' of the group – and Birna also had a taste while observing Freyja. She attempted to imitate Freyja's action, although it lasted a short while, as Birna displayed a dislike for eating sand. Through a close reading of the transcript, it is observable that Birna was perhaps showing Freyja that she had the same interest, that they were 'alike' through the reciprocity of sand-eating, a sign of budding friendship (Eleni, 2025; Greve, 2005) as well as a sign of sociality, as they were both taking part in these highly structured interactions and contributing to the social context and organisation (Levinson, 2006). Another instance of humorous acts that were of interest to the toddlers to imitate was Andrea's laughing play in Article III. Both Vera and Harry were rather quick to join in with the laughing through 'reusing with transformation' (C. Goodwin, 2018) Andrea and Maria's laughter. They did this to indicate their joint

attention and interest to create a sense of togetherness by using laughter as an interactional tool, similar to findings from previous research (Cekaite & Andrén, 2019).

In Article III, imitation was clearly one of the main ways the participating toddlers attempted to join an ongoing interaction. As the findings of that article state, we can see Maria enacting the activity of talking with her grandmother on the phone through interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 1992) of an activity commonly observable in everyday social worlds. In this play, she was reproducing this act with gusto, using a small toy car as her 'phone'. Vera and Harry were both keen onlookers to Maria's play who was in the role of the more experienced player in the group, perhaps providing a *zone of proximal* development (Vygotsky, 1978) for the younger toddlers. These findings also align with research by Pursi (2022) showing how a teacher can provide opportunities for toddlers, in the role of perceptive onlookers, to observe teacher-child play as a stepping stone towards child-child social interactions. Even though Maria is not a teacher, she is older and a more experienced social player and is a role-model of how to interact and play in the peer group. After enthusiastically observing for a while, both Vera and Harry reused with transformation (C. Goodwin, 2018) Maria's phone play. Both of them reproduced the action of talking on the phone but more subtly. Vera carefully put her hand to her ear, whispered the word 'grandma' while Harry carelessly put his hand holding a toy car to his ear for a few short stints. They seemed to be reproducing Maria's acts, testing them out and thereby signalling their engagement to the ongoing activity (Sacks, 1995). Through these actions, they contributed to the social context and organisation, which are key components of sociality (Levinson, 2006).

The discussion above highlights how toddlers use *interpretive imitation*, which is a creative and context-sensitive 'reuse with transformation' (C. Goodwin, 2018), as a way to participate in peer interactions. Rather than simply copying, toddlers adapt observed behaviours to suit the situation, such as imitating a peer's touch or movement to initiate interactions. Imitation is used not only to seek interaction but also to build shared understanding, express humour and create a sense of togetherness within the peer group, as seen in the shared laughter, playful and humorous gestures or acts like 'sand-eating'. These actions reflect deliberate, embodied strategies to engage with others. They also serve as expressions of the toddlers' sociality, showing that imitation among toddlers is an active, imaginative form of social participation.

7.3 Toddlers' sociality

When examining the data and the findings of the three articles, toddlers' sociality was the common thread that was woven throughout. The participating toddlers showed clear interest, willingness and capability to initiate, respond to and co-create moments of togetherness and the 'mutual we' through embodied interactions within participation frameworks that were taking place in their peer group. They made numerous attempts to show their peers that they were present and willing and able to participate in meaningful

interactions, i.e. they were repeatedly showcasing their sociality. The different examples discussed in chapters 7.1 and 7.2 are clear instances of toddlers making a conscious decision to interact with a peer; they are showing preference (Engdahl, 2012; Greve, 2005). Furthermore, through their observable interest to interact, they were positioning themselves as active co-producers of the culture of the peer group (Corsaro, 2017), demonstrating competence in performing actions that co-created the 'mutual we' (Greve, 2005), even if their attempts did not always work. Throughout the data the toddlers repeatedly showed their interest in joining the 'mutual we' of ongoing peer interaction and play. Often they extended the play in order to share a moment of togetherness with the peer group as they explored the boundaries of what is acceptable. Through their actions they added sequentially to the co-production of the interactive context and made observable their sociality and strong interest to interact with their peers. Imitation acted as a strategy to signal to others that they understood the play, that they wanted and were able to join the play, and that they could be trusted to competently aid in the co-construction of the peer group's 'mutual we'. Through imitation they were contributing to the context as well as to social organisation through their interactions, clearly signalling sociality (Levinson, 2006).

It is of note, that in all of the examples, the orientation of the body is crucial to signal interest. The toddlers would place their bodies within, or close to, the occurring participation framework and thereby indicate an interest to interact through alignment of the body. This is in line with what Charles Goodwin (2007) observed in his research with his father who had aphasia. Alignment of the body indicates a 'cooperative stance' to the other toddlers. These examples also show the process of F-formation that Kendon (1990, as cited in Bateman, 2022) frames as a foundation of a multi-person interaction. The toddlers were 'orienting their bodies' in a manner that helped them have 'easy, direct, and equal access to every other participant's transactional segment' (p. 59), and they were all taking a cooperative stance (C. Goodwin, 2007) with this alignment of their bodies. They were all sharing the space together, clearly signalling sociality.

All of these attempts by the toddlers at gaining access to ongoing participation frameworks through the use of varied forms of embodied strategies made visible their social competence and sociality. After observing and gaining an understanding of what was happening, they used smile, touch and humour to gain access. In addition, through their interpretive use of imitation, they competently employed imaginative uses of embodied interactions. Through these strategies, the toddlers demonstrated their ability to co-construct and co-create the peer group through these moments of togetherness, which is in line with previous studies (e.g. Corsaro, 2005, 2017; Eleni, 2025; Engdahl, 2021; Greve, 2008; Løkken, 2010; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015; Pursi & Lipponen, 2020). The findings of this study also indicate that toddlers are competent in doing this by themselves independent of adult interactive intervention, although it is important to stress the importance of positive adult influence in shaping the environment to make it easier for toddlers to interact and be together as a peer group. There were numerous

attempts of interactions that were successful and that the participating toddlers were more than able to initiate and to join ongoing participation frameworks and create moments of togetherness and the 'mutual we' in highly skilled ways. Their interactions were voluntary, and the toddlers expressed their preference to interact with each other. They observably demonstrated that they liked each other—they were 'friends' (Eleni, 2025; Greve, 2008).

Throughout the data, toddlers' strong social competence in co-creating peer group dynamics through embodied interactions was emphasised. The toddlers demonstrated voluntary efforts to engage with peers, using gaze, touch, imitation, body alignment and humour, to initiate, respond to and sustain meaningful social interactions. In other words, their sociality was evident throughout. The embodied strategies toddlers used signals their desire to participate and belong to a shared 'mutual we'. It is important to note, however, that despite the evidence of social competence, there were, nevertheless, initiation attempts that were not successful. While this study focuses on peer interactions and the role of the educator was not examined, there were instances where a responsive, knowledgeable teacher would have been able to guide the toddlers through their failed attempts at interaction. In spite of this, even when attempts were unsuccessful, the toddlers still made observable actions to connect, proving themselves to be active, capable co-constructors of peer culture without always relying on adult interactive intervention. These findings, therefore, challenge outdated views of toddlers as passive in social interactions and underscore their agency in shaping social relationships.

7.4 Conclusions

The findings of this research project have shown that observation is a crucial first step in social interactions in the toddler peer group as it aids in the understanding of social dynamics and how to engage meaningfully with peers. Toddlers' use of imitation is creative, as they adapt observed actions to initiate and join ongoing interactions. This is not simply copying others but a thoughtful reuse of others' actions. Through imitation, toddlers can build a shared understanding and create a sense of togetherness with their peers. Their competent ways of using observation and imitation as active participation in their peer group also defines their sociality. They show clear interest and competence in the use of these different embodied interactive strategies, highlighting their active role in interpreting and transforming previous turns and responding to social cues. By so doing, toddlers actively shape their social relationships and peer culture. Through a rigorous, detailed examination of these interactions using multimodal conversation analysis, we can see that toddlers used highly structured methods to interact with each other. They used adjacency pairs and conversational repair in their embodied interactions, where their reading of a situation usually concluded with changing their method by repairing it. Use of the gaze was often the first part of an adjacency pair, followed by touch, imitation or humorous and playful modes of interaction.

Although the concept of sociality is difficult to define (Enfield & Levinson, 2006b) it does involve the use of highly structured interactive strategies that contribute to the social context (Levinson, 2006). The findings of this study add a unique contribution to our understanding of toddler sociality through the examination of detailed transcriptions of the interactions between the participating toddlers using multimodal conversation analysis. The participating toddlers used highly structured interactive strategies in competent ways in order to contribute to the social context of the peer group. They were keen to interact with their peers, often exploring social norms and rules through their interactions. Their repeated attempts at creating a 'mutual we' and a sense of togetherness were observable in the data. They did indeed, showcase their sociality throughout.

7.5 Methodological challenges

My background as an early childhood teacher as well as my researcher reflexivity (Berger, 2015) were of great assistance in interpreting and analysing the data. My history may also have impacted how I presented myself in the setting in which I collected the data and in my interactions with the participating toddlers. However, I attempted throughout the research process to be aware of my own background and my view of toddlers as competent and capable social actors, as I have discussed in detail in previous chapters. This does not change the fact that one of the main methodological challenges that faces all researchers working with young children, is the fact that we are outsiders, 'atypical adults' (Corsaro, 2017, p. 55). We do not behave in the same way as the teachers and other adults in children's lives and our presence in the field of study may, therefore, have implications. In addition, the participating toddlers could not explicitly tell me what they were experiencing during the interactions I observed. Hence, I have to rely upon my interpretation of their experiences. The methods of multimodal conversation analysis, with the detailed, inductive focus on the data itself, are valuable in exploring children's perspectives, as they help with the interpretation of what is important to the toddlers by looking at what is repeated in their interactions. Furthermore, in this study, CA transcriptions offer real-life examples of toddler interactions with peers and, paired with the level of detail that goes into the analysis of these transcriptions, help with the trustworthiness of the findings. This will be discussed in greater detail in Section 7.7. Given all the steps I took throughout the duration of this PhD research project, I feel confident that through my approach, I was able to face these challenges in ethically and methodologically sound ways.

Another methodological challenge was my use of the video camera and a wireless microphone for the first-time as a researcher. Some of the video clips recorded were not stable or of good quality and the sound was inaudible, but the interactions in these clips were very valuable to the research project. There is, therefore, a chance that I missed some parts of the interactions and, therefore, misinterpreted them in my analysis, as those missing parts were not in the transcription. Overall, however, the video clips provided valuable information and insight into the embodied interactions that took place between

the participating toddlers. In addition, the toddlers often interacted with the camera, wanted to see what I was filming and commented regularly on what I was doing. The clip-on wireless microphone was also a distraction for the children in the beginning, a noticeable addition, and it often interrupted their interactions. There is, therefore, a risk that they were 'performing' for the camera at certain times. As I have examined and analysed the many hours of video footage I accumulated, I do not believe that this is of huge concern. The interactions captured, transcribed and analysed were self-initiated by the toddlers. They often forgot or did not notice the camera, although I never hid it, and the microphone soon became a 'thing' that was hanging in the curtains or located on a nearby shelf. Very quickly and without many hiccups, the toddlers accepted my presence in the setting with apparent ease.

7.6 Implications

In the introduction of this thesis, I discussed the main aim of the research project, which is to add to the knowledge base of toddler social experiences within ECEC settings and aid in the development of a deeper understanding of the importance of the peer group to toddlers as well as to examine what toddler sociality may look like. This can also contribute to the professional development of early childhood teachers working with the youngest children in ECEC. Additionally, I aimed to showcase multimodal conversation analysis as a valuable research approach when examining embodied interactions of very young children and thereby provide an original outlook on toddlers' peer relationships.

First, the study contributes to the current theoretical knowledge base of toddlers' social experiences within ECEC settings and aligns with previous research conducted within the field showcasing toddlers as strong and competent social actors. Framing these social experiences within the concept of sociality also adds a new perspective to the current, ever expanding, theoretical knowledge. In addition, there have been very few studies conducted in Iceland with toddlers in regard to their social interactions and experiences within ECEC settings. The findings of this study, therefore, offer a valuable insight into a typical ECEC setting in Iceland, what toddlers can offer to the setting as competent, active participants in their peer group and peer culture, as well as what the setting can offer to toddlers.

The second contribution this study makes to the field of early childhood education and care is through providing a deeper understanding of the importance of embodied interactions, the crucial role they play in the toddler peer group and how they are structured. This has clear implications for the practice of toddler teachers in ECEC as well as for the discourse in teacher education and policymaking. With the growing number of young toddlers in ECEC settings in Iceland, as well as internationally, this is a timely and important contribution. The more we know about what is important to toddlers in regard to their social interactions, the better we can support those interactions. With a deeper understanding of toddler sociality and the crucial part interactions play in

nurturing sociality, we can provide specific care and education in our settings that offer support and opportunities for toddlers to interact and build a 'mutual we' with their peers.

Third, this study shows that using a multimodal conversation analysis approach to research with toddlers is important and useful, as it provides detailed transcriptions of the embodied interactions, showing the sequence of interactions and the competence required of toddlers to successfully interact with their peers. This study has successfully added to multimodal conversation analysis, which is a growing field of research within multiple disciplines, by exploring such a young age group. Additionally, this research offers a unique and original outlook both in the multimodal EMCA field and for research in ECEC in general.

7.7 Study strengths and limitations

It is important to examine the strengths and limitations of a research project such as this one to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings. This is a small scale, qualitative study, and therefore, we cannot generalise the findings. However, we can provide in-depth detail of what was observed in this particular study which may be applicable in other contexts. In this study, I observed competent, capable toddlers engage in complex social interactions through embodied strategies that resulted in their making meaningful connections with their peers. The participants were small in number, and I cannot say that I would have observed the same kind of interactions in a different setting. Although I strongly believe that I would have, my goal was not to make a generalisable outcome but to dive deep and find meaning in the data that made sense to me and, hopefully, to other early childhood teachers and researchers. Delving deeply into a small-scale data set is another strength in the study, which offers valuable information that can be used to improve pedagogical practice and teacher education for the benefit of the youngest children in ECEC settings around the world.

Another possible limitation is the fact that I alone selected the video clips to analyse. I based this choice of video clips on moments that were determined to be significant to the participants and appropriate for the research questions. These moments were reoccurring and noticeably important to the toddlers. Still, the choice of video clips influenced the data analysis and the interpretation of the data as well as how the toddlers were represented in the study. I was also the main researcher who conducted the data analysis, although my doctoral committee supervised my analysis and provided excellent feedback, comments and questions regarding the analysis, which helped enormously in conceptualising my findings. In addition, I shared my data with the Child Interaction Group at Linköping University in Sweden and in a data sharing session at UCLA, where I received very helpful comments and questions regarding my analysis. This was valuable and helped in forming trustworthy analysis and findings and drawing conclusions based on the data.

The fact that the main analysis and interpretation was mine should also be viewed as a strength of the study. I became deeply familiar with the participating toddlers, and

through repeatedly watching the video clips and conducting detailed transcription of the interactions, I gained a rich understanding of the circumstances. This has enabled me to become an advocate for toddlers and spread awareness within the ECEC sector in Iceland about the way they interact and participate with each other, and about how their sociality is represented through these competent interactions with their peer group, hopefully resulting in higher quality pedagogical practice.

7.8 Further research

Finally, I would like to highlight the need for possible future research that I believe can be of importance to the ECEC field. In Iceland, very little research has been conducted on social interactions in the toddler peer group and there is a need for more, especially considering the increase in the number of young toddlers (12 to 24 months) in ECEC settings in Iceland. This study examined embodied interactions stressing free play, for the most part. Although there were other structured sessions throughout the day that I video recorded, the vast majority of my data was from free play sessions. I do believe that it would be valuable to examine how more structured sessions impact these embodied interactions and how toddlers showcase their sociality when taking part in these sessions. There are certain sessions throughout the day in Icelandic ECEC settings, such as mealtimes, singing time, circle times and other group activities that could be analysed. These sessions are typically teacher led and often have fixed rules and routines, based on the traditional ways Icelandic ECEC settings have operated for the last several decades.

In addition to analysing these more formal adult-directed situations, more and more settings are changing from the traditional pedagogical work and basing their conditions on the UNCRC and children's rights, and it would be interesting to examine what this looks like in practice. In addition, it would be beneficial to explore how practice underscored by UNCRC impacts these traditional sessions and determine if there are differences between the opportunities toddlers have to interact through embodied strategies depending on whether the sessions are traditional or based more on the UNCRC.

Another research idea that would be valuable to the ECEC field is examining what toddlers do in outside play. In Icelandic ECEC settings, children generally spend a lot of time outside in free play, depending on the season. It would be interesting to examine what toddlers do during their time outside and what their play and interactions reveal. I am curious how environmental factors and different play materials influence toddlers' interactions, activities and sociality in outside play. Weather, bulky outdoor clothing and time can have an impact on how toddlers interact and move around outside. The weather is a significant variable for outside play in Iceland. It is often windy, cold and rainy and winters can be cold, snowy and quite dark, affecting the clothing toddlers wear when outside. Snowsuits or rainsuits, snow boots or rain boots, can be bulky and restrict movement and toddlers' ability to touch each other or notice subtleties in body

movements, as well as their ability to run around and use different play materials. It can be difficult to climb onto a seesaw with a thick, cumbersome snowsuit or when the seesaw is buried in snow. The weather also limits the length of time toddlers are allowed to play outside. It would also be of interest to examine the impact of increased freedom to explore and play independent of direct adult supervision, which is common in the outdoor play area in ECEC settings in Iceland, and study how this might influence interactions and sociality. To date, such research has not been conducted in Iceland. In addition, I believe that an international research project examining outdoor activities of toddlers in different countries would be beneficial for focusing on the impact weather and climate may have as well as other environmental resources and affordances.

A fourth research project that could add valuable knowledge to the field is the role of the peer group on young toddlers transitioning from home to ECEC settings. Constructive research (Pálmadóttir, 2020, 2022) has been conducted in Iceland on the views and experiences of parents and educators during this time period, but no research in Iceland to date has addressed the peer group and the other children a new toddler encounters as they become 'playschool-children'. Using a multimodal conversational analysis approach to examine the embodied interactions that take place among the toddlers would be interesting and offers the potential for new insights into how educators can plan and organise the 'adjustment' period, the first several weeks of the transition from home to ECEC. As social interactions lie at the core of toddler sociality, examining how new toddlers use different embodied strategies to become acquainted with each other and build a 'mutual we' could add valuable knowledge to the field and to the planning of the ECEC teachers.

7.9 Final words

This PhD research project has been a journey of discovery. The research question I set out to answer, *how do toddlers initiate and participate in interactions within their peer group,* has provided valuable insight into the social world of toddlers and strengthened my belief that they are competent social actors who have agency to interact with their peers. Their sociality has been obvious throughout the collected data. It has been a joy and a challenge to convey these findings in a manner that gives true credit to my very young participants, and I hope that I have been successful and that the findings will be of use to practitioners in ECEC as well as to other researchers within the field.

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Appendices