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**Title:** Teachers' contribution to the social life in Finnish preschool classrooms during structured learning sessions

**Year:** 2014

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Salminen, J., Hännikäinen, M., Poikonen, P.-L., & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2014). Teachers' contribution to the social life in Finnish preschool classrooms during structured learning sessions. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(3), 416-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.793182>

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Teachers' Contribution to the Social Life in Finnish Preschool Classrooms During Structured  
Learning Sessions

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## SOCIAL LIFE IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

### Teachers' Contribution to the Social Life in Finnish Preschool Classrooms During Structured Learning Sessions

### **Abstract**

This study aimed to clarify and deepen the knowledge on and understanding of the role that teachers' practices during teacher-led learning sessions play in creating and enhancing social life in Finnish preschool classrooms. Observational data pertaining to 20 preschool teachers were analysed according to the principles of thematic analysis. Four identified themes reflected teachers' contribution to social life in preschool classrooms in relation to their practices under different group compositions: (1) managing children's peer-relations; (2) promoting the coherence of the group; (3) supporting individual child as a part of group; and (4) discussing friendship and respectfulness. As a conclusion, the four themes indicated two aspects of teacher support provided for social life: managerial/organisational and emotional. The findings are useful for raising teachers' awareness of the importance of social life, especially when transitions to new educational contexts are timely.

*Keywords:* social life; teacher–child interaction; preschool education; qualitative research

### **1 Introduction**

By the time children start primary school, they have spent a considerable amount of time in early educational settings and have experienced various social interactions there (Hoffert & Sandberg, 2001). In many countries, the final year of early childhood education prepares children for primary school, and for Finnish children this means attending preschool. Finland is one of the rare European countries where children go to primary school at the age of seven. Each year, preschool education is a natural part of the lives of nearly 59,000 Finnish 6-year-olds (Statistics Central, 2012), which means that virtually the whole age cohort participates (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). Preschool education in Finland is free of charge and preschool classrooms are located either in day care centres (79%) or primary schools (21%) (Statistics Finland, 2012). Despite the location or format of the preschool classroom, the legislation and practices remain the same (Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2010).

It is well known that educational settings are influential social contexts for shaping development (Ladd, Buhs, & Troop, 2002; Spivak & Farran, 2012). Within these contexts, children establish patterns of relationships both with adults and peers (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994), whilst learning important social skills such as to share, to regulate their emotions and to wait for their turn (Fabes, Martin, & Hanish, 2009). Children's peer relations are in many ways meaningful for social development, but teachers also play an important role. Teachers are the adults who share the social life of educational settings with children on a daily basis and are thus usually aware of children's social relationships and have opportunities to direct children's behaviour toward socially acceptable ways or to shape the context of peer contacts (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Lillvist, Sandberg, Björk-Åkesson, & Granlund, 2009).

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According to the recent reports of the quality in Finnish preschool classrooms, learning activities are most often teacher-led: over 60% of Finnish preschool teachers reported organising teacher-led activities daily (Hujala et al., 2012). Despite the fact that children's independent role and free play were mentioned as equally important and frequent forms of activities as teacher-led activities, observations in the same classrooms indicated that teacher-led discussions followed by individual paper-pen tasks were in fact predominant forms of learning activities, and further, they were also relatively long-lasting (Hujala et al., 2012). Bearing in mind that the main goal of the Finnish preschool education is to promote children's development and enable them to become humane and ethically responsible members of society (Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2010), and hence emphasising social development, it is surprising that less research has been conducted on how these two aspects co-occur in daily preschool activities.

This study focused on exploring how social life is constructed in preschool classrooms and further analysing and understanding the role of teachers' practices in creating and enhancing the social life in preschool classrooms during teacher-led learning sessions. This study is important for at least two reasons: To begin with, the concept of social life is explored and defined to a lesser extent in educational research (for an exception, see Larsson, 2012). This study helps teachers to become aware of what social life in early education could look like, thus, contributing to empirical and theoretical conceptualisation of social life. Secondly, this study provides practical examples of how teachers could enhance the social life in their classrooms alongside with the teacher-led activities, and under differing group compositions. These examples can be further utilized, for instance, in teacher education.

### **2 Social life**

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Social life of a preschooler is a surprisingly complex one, and a successful social life requires a wide range of abilities and emotional knowledge of social situations (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). MacMillan's dictionary (2012) defines social life as "the time that you spend enjoying yourself with friends", and, without a doubt experiencing such feelings of comfort during social interactions is a key element of a positive social life. Within this study, however, we describe a more diverse construct of social life in preschool classrooms and depict social life as consisting of a multitude of intertwined elements. Here, the basis for social life lies within the *interaction and social relationships* between children and adults, and, further, the nature of these relationships determines what kind of *emotional climate* develops in the classroom. Within this socially constructed network, teachers actively enhance the social life through their *varying practices*, for instance, by stating and negotiating rules, enhancing the *esprit de corps* (i.e., the common spirit existing among the members of a group) or altering the composition of the group.

### **2.1 Teacher–child interaction and relationships**

People form relationships by interacting with each other: within a series of interactions, previous experiences (also including emotions, attitudes and expectations) always influence the ones that follow (Hinde, 1987). Interactions, hence, can be seen to be shorter in nature and it usually requires a series of interactions to create relationships. It is fairly reasonable to conjure that daily teacher–child interactions also grow into relationships as time goes on. This study relies on conceptualisations of a sociocultural perspective where social interactions and cultural contexts are at the core of the developmental process (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Rogoff, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Social interactions in educational settings are rooted in the specific cultural activities of the communities (i.e., schools and day care centres) in which children and teachers interact (cf., Rogoff, 1991; preface). In classrooms, the teacher and children interact daily, which makes their relationships

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meaningful for social development. In many recent studies (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001), the importance of the teacher's role in supporting children's emerging social life in the classrooms has been suggested: Supportive relationships with teachers, are shown to promote children's sense of connectedness in the classroom, which results in less problematic behaviour and enhanced prosocial behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Warm teacher-child relationships, including teachers more deliberate and positive encouragement have also been noticed as enhancing classroom climate (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008; Spivak & Farran, 2012).

### **2.2 Classroom climate**

The condition of social 'climate' itself is hard to define, elusive to measure, and yet instantly recognisable when experienced (Ashkanasy, 2003). Within preschool classrooms, climate can be described to exist along a continuum from positive to negative climate (Howes & James, 2002). Positive climate is characterised by the togetherness (Hännikäinen & van Oers, 2002; van Oers & Hännikäinen 2001) and friendly atmosphere created together by the teacher and the children in their daily interactions, whereas negative climate is characterised by more conflictual relationships, anger, or hostility (Howes & James, 2002). Respectful interactions, shared responsibilities, affective expressions, comfort and help provided by teachers and are indicators of positive classroom climate and are known to enhance social well-being in the classroom (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007; Howes & James, 2002; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). Further, children feel more connected, behave better, and grow into successful adolescents when teachers succeed in creating a warm and open classroom climate that supports the children's emotions (Brackett et al., 2011). One of the key factors in this process may be teachers' sensitive approach to knowing each child and utilising this knowledge in daily interactions (Yan, Evans, & Harvey, 2011). Emotionally supportive classrooms

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are also related to greater child motivation, interest, enjoyment, and engagement (Curby et al. 2009), and to the development of social skills (Howes, 2000).

### **2.3 Social rules and mutual agreements**

Children encounter a wide variety of social rules and expectations in different social settings, and understanding these rules helps children to become responsible members of society (Smetana, 1993). Social rules are usually divided into moral and conventional rules. Moral rules consider issues such as the welfare of others, trust and fairness, whereas conventional rules regulate social interactions by providing members of society a set of shared expectations of how to behave. Awareness of different types of social rules can be seen to develop through active constructing in social interactions, where explicit or implicit teaching by adults and teachers could be one of the mediating ways (Smetana, 1993). Findings reported by Hännikäinen (2005) have revealed that teachers want to help children not only to obey the rules but also to adopt and understand them (see also Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Oftentimes, this is done to keep the group together and to create a disciplined learning environment, but ideally the rules are used to create and maintain the feeling of togetherness (i.e., a positive emotional quality of a group's activity that manifests itself in the tendency to strengthen the group's cohesion and to keep the group together despite conflicts; Hännikäinen & van Oers, 2002) amongst peers. Indeed, the mutual relationships and togetherness between children and the teacher as they interact and work together are of importance to the social life. Teachers' use of social rules may also clarify the social structure of the classroom. Smooth classroom management particularly enhances the social structure in the classroom: children with a sense of belonging and positive involvement in the classroom are more likely to demonstrate acceptance of authority and regulate their own behaviour in the classroom (Osterman, 2000).

### **2.4 Composition of the group**

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While supporting children's adaptation to social life, teachers should be conscious of the arrangements made considering children's roles and the composition of the group within the classroom (Kernan, Singer, & Swinnen, 2011), and they should apply this knowledge to their practices during structured learning activities. The core idea is that, through teachers' choices, children are provided with possibilities for learning to work with each other in group compositions of differing sizes during teacher-led activities.

Teachers can support social life, firstly, on the level of the individual, by creating relationships that foster emotional security with individual children. It has been suggested that emotional security provided by such warm relationships helps children to also perceive peers as potentially fun and interesting partners, and the children can thus use the secure relationships with adults as resources in exploring the social life in the classroom and to organise their experiences (Howes, 2000; Howes & James, 2002). Secondly, on the level of dyadic peer relationships and small groups, teachers can encourage children to join in by making arrangements that enhance their joining behaviours and by modelling socially appropriate behaviours. By working in such group compositions, children learn to improvise and cope with misunderstandings and disagreements (Singer & de Haan, 2007). Thirdly, on the level of whole group, teachers can establish positive interactions between all the children in their classroom (Kernan, Singer, & Swinenn, 2011; Vaughn & Santos, 2008). Practices on this level might, for instance, consist of establishing shared rules with the children and organising time for joint activities, and they foster the esprit de corps and the sense of belonging to a group. It is of interest to explore to what extent these different group compositions are being utilised in the daily work in preschool classrooms, and thus what types of possibilities for social interaction they provide for children.

### **3 Aim and Research Questions**

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The general purpose of this study is to explore how social life is constructed in preschool classrooms, and to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of well-functioning relationships for children's social development in educational settings. Consequently, the aim of this study is to clarify and deepen the knowledge on and understanding of the role that teachers' practices during teacher-led learning sessions play in creating and enhancing social life in Finnish preschool classrooms. The following research questions were addressed:

(1) What types of practices do teachers establish during learning sessions that contribute to social life in preschool classrooms?

(2) How do teachers arrange the composition of groups in order to enhance social life (i.e., by individual children, or in pairs or small groups, or as a whole group)?

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Participants

The data for this study were collected as part of the large-scale *First Steps* follow-up study (2006–2011). Approximately 2,000 children from four municipalities, alongside their parents and teachers, participated. The *First Steps* -study aimed to explore interaction, motivation and learning in the child–parent–teacher triangle (Lerkkanen et al., 2006). 20 Finnish preschool teachers (with 266 children in their classrooms) were selected as informants from the total of 49 of those participating in the *First Steps* follow-up study. In a previous study by Salminen et al. (2012), the original 49 teachers were divided into four subgroups on the basis of observed classroom quality, as assessed with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). Teachers in the current study were selected on the basis of being in the highest quality subgroup (i.e., establishing high-quality *emotional support, instructional support, and classroom management*), in

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order to seek out the best practices amongst the teachers. Further, teachers in the highest quality subgroups also represented the majority of teachers (53%) in the Finnish sample.

All of the 20 teachers investigated in this study were Finnish speaking females and worked in classrooms where children were also Finnish. The majority of the teachers had had relatively long work experience: 76% of the teachers had worked for more than 11 years in educational settings. The number of six-year-olds in the classrooms varied from 3 to 24, with an average of 13 six-year-old children in the classrooms. All of the classrooms contained typical preschool equipment and materials and followed the educational guidelines outlined in the national curriculum (Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2010).

### **4.2 Classroom observations**

The data were collected through classroom observations in spring 2007, where teachers' *practices and interaction with children* were of interest. Observations were conducted in preschool classrooms on two different days. 18 of the teachers carried an MP3-player during the observation sessions and 2 teachers were video recorded. As a result, 34 recordings were obtained. The length of the recordings varied from 15 to 80 minutes, with an average length of 53 minutes. The recordings were transcribed, resulting in 538 pages of text.

Observations conducted in preschool classrooms usually took place between 8 and 12 o'clock. This is usually the most productive part of the day in Finnish preschool classrooms, when morning assembly (i.e., checking the calendar, date, and weather etc. together) and more formal learning sessions (ca. 45 minutes) take place. During the morning hours, the children also had time for free play and they spent time on outdoor activities, which is typical at Finnish preschools. The content of the learning activities on observation days varied as follows: 14 observed learning sessions focused

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on pre-math skills, 12 sessions on pre-literacy skills, and 10 sessions on other content (e.g., handicrafts, music).

### 4.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed qualitatively, according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and abductive reasoning (e.g., Patton, 2002). Analysis of the data began with familiarising ourselves with the transcribed classroom observations by reading them carefully and repeatedly whilst simultaneously considering the theoretical literature and previous studies, on social life as a phenomenon in educational settings. While reading the transcribed observations, it was apparent that different episodes of varying lengths began to emerge, each indicating the different aspects related to social life and social behaviour in a classroom context. These episodes (containing one or several meaningful interactional expressions of varying lengths) were determined as the units of analysis for this study. Altogether, 170 episodes were identified.

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\*\*\* Table 1 somewhere here\*\*\*

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Table 1 summarises the three stages of the analytical process. At *the first stage* of analysis the episodes that had risen from the data were gone through one at a time and each one was assigned an *initial code* based on the similarity in the contents of the units, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). At this point, 12 codes were created and each one indicated different aspects of social life involving teacher participation (e.g., the teacher enhanced children's participation; the teacher provided support for peer relations; etc.).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), *the second stage* in thematic analysis is to create initial themes by drawing together the coded episodes. Within this study, the themes were created (1)

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by carefully searching for similarities and connections concerning the aspects of social life emerging in coded episodes, and (2) by utilising two guiding questions (i.e., How does the teacher work with children?; In what type of group composition does the activity occur?). These two procedures ensured that we were better able to distinguish the aspects of social life from each other, as well as to take teachers' practices and the form of social dynamics into consideration. As a result, nine preliminary themes were established.

Within this study, as with thematic approaches in general, reviewing and revising the analytical process in the order from coded episodes to preliminary themes is required to obtain themes that reliably represent the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore *at the third stage* of the analysis, the nine preliminary themes were carefully explored once more and the core of each theme was crystallised. Multiple crossovers were discovered, where two themes were dealing with clearly the same phenomenon. These themes were revised once more in line with the research questions. The final model revealed four themes, namely: (1) *managing children's peer-relations*; (2) *promoting the coherence of the group*; (3) *supporting individual child as a part of group*; and (4) *discussing friendship and respectfulness* — with each theme providing a unique perspective on how teachers' practices under different group compositions contribute to social life in preschool classrooms (for a recap see table 2).

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\*\*\* Table 2 somewhere here \*\*\*

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## 5 Results

The context of this study was a situational and social network of preschool classrooms where teachers' practices were closely embedded with the group composition, i.e., teachers supported

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children in different interactional situations. The four identified themes were hence constructed in relation to the two research questions (i.e., What types of practices do teachers establish during learning sessions that contribute to social life in preschool classrooms?; How do teachers arrange the composition of groups in order to enhance social life?), with both of them adding an own perspective to the themes. The themes are introduced in detail in the following paragraphs, after making few general remarks of the observed classrooms.

The majority of the teaching in the observed classrooms was teacher-led. Teacher-led sessions were observed in all of the classrooms, during which group discussion and/or joint activities led to more individualised tasks. The learning sessions were, however, highly play-like in every classroom, which is typical of Finnish preschools. Teachers' support for social life occurred mostly through simple practices such as gestures and directions, but also through organisational arrangements and activities with clearer goals for social behaviour.

### 5.1 Managing children's peer-relations

The teacher suggesting ways for children to cooperate *in pairs or small groups* was the overarching factor within the first theme. Teachers either sensitively *scaffolded* children's working with peers or more *directly encouraged* children to establish socially appropriate manners with each other. In addition, teachers often *modelled* polite ways of interacting with friends. As a consequence of the teachers' practices, the children were better able to take one or two other children into account and start or continue working together. These types of practices were most often observed in the daily social life in preschool classrooms. *Interaction between two or three children* is a significant way of practising interactions that are also needed in larger groups.

**Scaffolding.** Teachers *sensitively scaffolded children's peer relationships* in the classrooms, and by doing so helped the children to *express polite comments, help each other, or negotiate*

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*activities with peers.* The teachers adopted a somewhat smaller role while scaffolding peer relationships than while directly suggesting ways of working in pairs. This was apparent in two ways: In some cases, teachers' own expressions served as stepping stones from which children could themselves elaborate the comments of encouragement, as seen in Example 1.

Example 1: The teacher and the children are starting to work with money- related tasks and games. A child asks the teacher what the rules of the game are and the teacher gives a very brief response. Another child approaches and says, "I could teach you how to play that game." (Classroom 8)

In some other cases, children established friendly behaviours on their own, which the teacher then extended and built on, as is apparent in Example 2.

Example 2: A child exclaims that she is unable to perform a given task and sighs in a frustrated manner. Another child says encouragingly, "Practice makes perfect". The teacher hears this and elaborates, "Yes! You are right indeed, and even the most perfect person has to practise some more." (Classroom13)

**Direct encouragement of cooperation with peers.** The teachers used several simple expressions in directing children to cooperate together in pairs or small groups (e.g., "Sami, when you finish working with that task, please compare with Helena whether you answered in a similar way or not", or, "Oh dear, that is a tough question indeed: 'How to draw ten?' Kiira, did you hear that? Can you please help Anna, since you just showed me how you did it!"). Such expressions were rich in number and they were found in nearly every classroom of the observed teachers. These types of expressions aimed to alter the previously predominant way of sticking to one's own work and not being concerned with "anybody else's business but my own". There were also longer episodes in which teachers directed children to work more systematically in pairs or small groups, usually in more than one combination pair, and for longer periods of time (see Example 3).

Example 3: The teacher has organised a game where the aim is to practise learning the correspondence between amounts and numbers. She has divided the girls and boys into their own small groups. The boys get to arrange cards with dots on them (from one to twelve) from smallest to largest. The girls are arranging the cards with

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numbers from one to twelve in a similar way. After this, the cards are randomly handed out to the children. The teacher turns on some music from the CD-player and the children move around in the classroom. When the music stops they start to look for the person with whom their own number or dotted card will match. After finding a pair, the children hold each other's hands and spin around the way the teacher has shown them. The children move about happily and cooperate well in the randomly selected pairs. (Classroom 19)

**Modelling.** The teachers also used words and expressions that *modelled the polite way of interacting with each other* in social contexts. Teachers' expressions were pointed mostly at individual children or pairs. The expressions of the teachers were relatively simple within this theme, but they clearly modelled an expected way of addressing other people in daily interactions. For example, one teacher said "Oh, thank you Sofia dear, you are being so kind", and, "May I please ask you to turn off the lights?" as well as, "Did you run into a difficult part that I could help you with?"

### 5.2 Promoting the coherence of the group

This theme introduced teaching practices that aimed to keep the group socially coherent and functioning. The difference in group composition was clear when compared to the one in theme 1, since the practices within this theme *were more often directed at a complete group of children*. These practices included *suggestions for working according to commonly shared rules and being fair to everyone*. As a consequence, there were also practices that *enhanced and constructed the esprit de corps*. This was the second most prevalent theme in this study. The prevalence speaks for itself when it comes to the importance of teachers establishing a coherence and common understanding of the ways in which children are expected to work together *in a group*.

**Social rules and management.** Teachers' practices referring *to the way of working as a group, commonly shared social rules, and management* were very frequently observed in the classrooms. Teachers often used small references to social rules of the group, such as asking children to raise their finger or hand like school children in order to get a turn, as these were typical ways of

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behaving in this particular group (e.g., Teacher prompting her preschoolers “Do you remember how to create a silence?” or, “I’m going to give a turn to those of you who remember to raise their hand.”). Teachers also used many sentences that contained the use of the word ‘we’ in order to create a way of working in groups that would be more transparent to children. For instance, a teacher told the children that “When *we* make new arrangements, we do them together” and, “I suggest *we* make a deal that from now on our group works like this” as well as, “Maybe *we* should explain to the observers why we stopped so suddenly, that *we* have this special sign for silence.” Teachers also referred to maintaining the peace when working in the classroom, thus encouraging children to respect the work of others.

**Fair play.** *Fairness* was a very important aspect of this theme in the preschool classrooms, and it can be seen to enhance the coherence of the group. Managing the classroom interactions fairly and diplomatically was something that the teachers established very carefully, but also what children expected of them. Teacher expressed fairness by saying, for example, “You see, Kaisa, it is important that you are quiet and listen – remember how we listened to you when you spoke to us?” or, “There is one for each of you, everyone will get their share, don’t worry!” In addition, for instance, teachers had diaries where they marked down how many times children had had a leading role in certain group sessions. Teachers also allowed children to participate in decision making and thus enhanced the experience of fair play for children. Example 4 shows such a decision-making episode.

Example 4: There is a custom of children bringing their own toys to preschool on Mondays. During the morning assembly the children, one by one, introduce their toy to the others. At this time, the teacher asks the children how they should decide who gets to go first to introduce his or her toy. The children share their ideas and opinions, such as, to draw lots. One child then suggests that they could use a rhyme to choose whose turn it is and the other children agree. The teacher asks what might be a suitable rhyme, and the children discuss it and make further suggestions. Finally they come up with a rhyme about cars. (Classroom 4)

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**Esprit de corps.** At the group level, there were also several observed practices that can be seen to have created an *esprit de corps* amongst the group of children. Teachers supported this by clarifying the sense of “our group” and reminding the children of their friends who were absent on that particular day: “We should also read this story to Eeva and Anna when they are well again and come back” or, “Henri, could you please tell all of us whether there are friends missing from the same row that you are sitting in?” or, “Oh, you are going to visit Anna today. Do you remember that Anna was in our group last year?” Such practices may help children to create a sense of empathy with their peers in the group, to work together, and simultaneously to provide a sense of belonging.

Further, teachers encouraged the *esprit de corps* by engaging children in shared activities, such as designing a class T-shirt for the whole group to wear in a floor-ball game, or constructing a spaceship as a group on the basis of designs drawn by the children in the group. Physical proximity was, in addition, one of the things that seemed to make working in a group easier and more enjoyable. Example 5 describes a teacher using physical proximity as a tool to enhance the *esprit de corps*.

Example 5: The teacher has turned on some nice music and asks the children to relax and lay on the floor completely slack. She then starts to gently move the slack children closer to each other, placing their heads on each other’s laps, so that the children are soon lying in a form that resembles a fish fillet. She then starts to walk around the children exclaiming that she has to check and see whether the fish is “properly cooked”. This means that she holds the children’s legs or arms up and sees if they can remain relaxed and limp. She also adds some spices to the fish (tickles children). The children giggle and seemingly enjoy the proximity with each other and the teacher. (Classroom 19)

### 5.3 Supporting individual child as a part of the group

Within this theme, *teachers’ practices enabling the parallel between individual and group work dynamics* were observed. This means that, in their activities, teachers were working with the whole group of children, such as when discussing things, but they simultaneously allowed individual children some degree of leadership or a visible role. These types of practices can be seen to enhance

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children's ability to listen to each other and to learn to give time and space to a speaker, but they also provide new aspects to learn from the individual child, their peer. Example 6 shows this parallel dynamic between the individual and the group.

Example 6: There is a tradition in this particular preschool classroom that a stuffed animal, a small bunny called Nuppu, gets to go home with all of the children in the group individually during the year. Over the weekend, the selected child's parents write their family greetings into a notebook, and when their child brings Nuppu to the preschool classroom the following Monday, the child shares the greetings and tells the whole group how Nuppu spent the weekend—as if Nuppu is speaking the words. For example, “This time I visited Anni's home. Anni had a birthday party on Sunday to which all of her relatives were invited”. (Classroom 12)

During the observed learning sessions, teachers often gave room to individual children through small gestures or comments, such as by saying, “Hold on for a while everyone. Now tell us Emma. Emma has lost a tooth this morning! I think this calls for a little applause!” or, “Whose turn is it to introduce the weather today. Well it is sweet sweet Sami's turn!” Such small efforts were usually quite meaningful to the individual child given attention. The following excerpt, Example 7 shows how much a little boy enjoys his special role amongst his friends.

Example 7: The teacher has organised for an individual child to write the name of the month that corresponds to the letters his friends are saying out loud. The teacher says, “Santeri, it is your turn to write. Listen carefully to what we are about to tell you. You are our secretary, aren't you?” The child proudly responds: “No, I'm the leader!”(Classroom 1)

### **5.4 Discussing friendship and respectfulness**

Within this theme, examples of *teachers dealing with issues of friendship, respect or empathy as clear themes in the structured learning sessions* were observed. In these examples, teachers paid attention to explaining themes of friendship and the importance of getting along with each other. These types of interactions occurred *amongst the whole group of children*. The next excerpt, Example 8, illustrates how the teacher utilises a play as an introduction to the topic of friendship and

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how the children are easily able to participate in the activity and discussion as a result. It is a fine example of how play can enhance children's ability to understand more abstract concepts, such as friendship or empathy.

Example 8: The teacher and the children are participating in a teacher organised play in which each child is assigned an animal character. In the play, the personified animals go to an abandoned cabin and one by one knock on the door, asking to come in and join the others. All of the other animals are allowed to join in, but when the fox knocks on the door the animals hesitate. The animals ponder whether the fox should be allowed to come inside, because he has used some trickery in the past. Eventually, the animals decide to also let the fox inside the cabin. After the play, the teacher discusses with the children what friendship is and uses the fox as an example, asking "How would the fox have felt if the others would not have let him in?" The children provide examples from their own lives as they discuss. (Classroom 2)

Listening to the others, showing respect to peers, and being good friends were important aspects of social life that teachers were aiming to introduce to the children during the structured learning sessions. The following excerpt, Example 9, shows how the teacher skilfully introduces social themes, such as showing respect for others' hard work and the ability to feel and interpret the emotions of others.

Example 9: An exhibition opens on the school premises for which 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders have planned and constructed miniature cities, and in which the preschool group has also been invited to participate. The teacher discusses with the children whether they have ever been to an exhibition before and what they remember about it. The teacher reminds the children of how much work the older children have done and how important it is for them that others are happy and proud of this hard work as well. She says, for example, "We should try to listen to what they tell us, because it is polite to do so", and, "If you have questions about the cities, you may ask. They will probably be happy if you want to know more", as well as, "When they speak we listen." (Classroom 4)

## 6 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how social life is constructed in preschool classrooms, and it aimed to clarify and deepen the knowledge on and understanding of the teachers' role in creating

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and enhancing social life in preschool classrooms during teacher-led learning sessions. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the main findings of this study.

### **6.1 Teachers promoting social life**

Social life was created and sustained through daily interactions between teachers and children. As suggested by the sociocultural theory, interactions in specific cultural contexts create a foundation and core for development (Rogoff, 1991; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). The effect of the cultural context of preschool classrooms was visible in the roles of teachers and children: Teachers had more of a leading role, probably, as a consequence of their professional status as educators. This was an important backdrop for discussing the findings from the teachers' point of view.

This study's four themes seemed to reflect two aspects of social life in particular. Themes 1 and 2 discussed mainly of teachers' practices aimed to concretely direct children's behaviour in a socially appropriate direction, whether within smaller groups or larger groups. Teachers modelled, scaffolded and directly suggested ways for children to work together, and these combined themes can be seen to represent the aspect of *organising and managing the social interactions*. These types of social manners in educational settings are very important to learn early on as children soon enter primary school and are expected to get along with their teachers and each other, and to play by the rules. The managerial and organisational aspects were also closely related to the social rules and shared agreements (Hännikäinen, 2005; Smetana, 1993) within the classrooms. Moral rules, such as those relating to fairness, were expressed many times and usually by the children, but it was the teacher's task to make sure that this joint principle was executed in practice. The experience of being treated fairly by the teacher is of importance since it may further enhance the sense of community in the classroom (Altenbaug, Engel, & Martin, 1995). In addition, conventional rules, such as working

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as “our group”, were often to by teachers in order to manage the interactions and keep the group coherent.

Themes 3 and 4, and also partially Theme 2, reflected another aspect of social life. Teachers’ support for knowing one’s friends and accepting them, for forming the *esprit de corps*, and for being able to feel empathy and to respect friendships can be seen to represent the *emotional aspect* of classroom social life. These types of practices deliver a strong message concerning the emotional charge that is embedded in interactions within classrooms and of the importance of positive climate for the social life in classrooms to flourish. It is also worth noting that, in order to occur, emotional expressions and discussions usually require a secure climate, and this may be one of the reasons why such episodes were somewhat less frequently observed than managerial episodes. Comfortable feelings and emotional support provided by teachers are also shown to be connected, for instance, to engagement and motivation (e.g., Curby et al., 2009), which are certainly also essential aspects of learning after preschool, in primary schools.

### **6.2 Group composition as a way to support social life**

Working as one whole group was the most observed form of group composition in nearly every classroom of this sample and the results indicated that working as a group could serve multiple purposes in enhancing social life. Firstly, group work was observed to enhance the coherence of the group and create an *esprit de corps* (as described in Theme 2). Secondly, working as a group was a fruitful format for discussing the themes of friendship and respectfulness or learning to be empathetic toward others (as described in Theme 4). Thirdly, the most significant finding was teachers’ use of the parallel between individual attention and group work (as described in Theme 3). As previous studies (e.g., Howes & James, 2002) have suggested, the individual relationship between teacher and child may serve as a secure base for children to utilise in their peer relations, thus, indirectly

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enhancing social interaction. In our research for this study, several episodes were observed where the teacher interacted with individual children during sessions held by the whole group, providing individual children the floor to enjoy personal attention (security) from the teacher and peers, to enable the other children to observe modelled acceptable behaviour, and to teach the sense of having respect for others.

Granted that working as a group has its advantages and that the majority of learning and interacting during observed sessions occurred in group activities followed by individualised tasks, it is not surprising that only one-third of the observed learning sessions were designed around interactions between pairs and small groups. The findings of this study provide a few good examples of teachers allowing help from peers, changing pairs, or forming small groups during the course of the activities. These types of opportunities to work with peers have been shown to enhance negotiations between children and practising socially appropriate behaviour (Kernan, Singer, & Swinnen, 2011; Singer & de Haan, 2007). It is apparent that it requires true effort on teachers' behalf to change the traditional view of learning and interacting during teacher-led learning sessions by making the sessions more interactive. The relatively small amount of such observed activities within this study indicated that teachers' pedagogical awareness and sensitivity to recognise and allow possibilities for multiple social interactions during teacher-led learning sessions are aspects of social life in regard to which Finnish teachers could further develop professionally.

### **6.4 Limitations**

There are certain limitations to this study that need to be discussed. Firstly, it is necessary to discuss the fact that the majority of the observed interactions were only audio recorded which made it impossible to *see* some of the aspects of social life in these classrooms – in contrast to those learning sessions that were video recorded. However, the audio recordings nevertheless captured important

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aspects, such as vocal expressions or the modelling of ongoing activities through words – these were considered in our analyses. Secondly, the amount of observed practices that could be considered as enhancing social life was modest. While there were more than 500 pages of transcribed classroom interactions, only 170 episodes on social life were identified. This could be explained by the timing of the observations. During the Spring semester (in February) of the preschool year, the teachers and the children had already worked together for more than six months. Based on previous findings by Hännikäinen (2003), this means that the teachers and the children had gone through the majority of social rules and created the esprit de corps well before the observations took place and now enjoyed the subsequent mutual, well-functioning interaction. This sounds like a justified conclusion, considering the overall goal of Finnish preschool education with its high emphasis on social development. One factor could also be the fact that the observations were conducted during formal, teacher-led activities. Situations and teachers' support could have been different during free play or outdoor activities than what they were during the more formal, teacher-led activities. Lastly, it is worth noting that the focus and scope of this study did not include the perspectives of the children with regard to their experiences of the social life in the preschool classrooms. It would be necessary to broaden the perspective to also feature children's points of view in future studies in order to create a more profound understanding of social life in preschool.

### **6.5 Conclusion and implications**

Based on the four themes identified within this study, we conclude that teachers' contribution to social life in Finnish preschool classrooms includes supporting children to be constructive, respectful friends, and to be able to work according to shared social rules in a supportive climate under a variety of group compositions. By describing the teaching practices that can be seen to enhance social life in preschool classrooms, this study sought insights into helping to raise teachers'

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awareness and providing examples to teachers who wish to foster the social life in their classrooms. These examples are also useful in teacher education, where they can be seen to deliver knowledge on the importance of a positive social life not only for the well-being of individual children in their imminent context but also in wider social contexts over time (Odom, McConnell, & Brown, 2008). Teachers who are conscious of the role of social relationships in classrooms may be better able to support children in their attempts to join in the group activities and sustain peer relations, which in turn can be seen as favourable behaviour in preventing, for instance, children's social exclusion.

This study drew from data pertaining to Finnish preschoolers who were on the verge of the transition from preschool to primary school. Thus, preparing children for transitioning to the next level and meeting the social demands of the school could be seen as subtle contributions of teachers' practices in daily social life in preschool classrooms in this study. Transitions also appears to be an international phenomenon and have been of interest in several recent studies (Ahtola, Poikonen, Kontoniemi, Niemi, & Nurmi, 2012; Hännikäinen, 2003; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). While exploring Finnish teachers' work in preparing children for primary school the results of this study may be transferable to other educational contexts and probably to other countries or cultures, as well as being of similar importance to the various educational transitions. The results of this study suggest that meeting the demands of working as competent and socially skilled individuals who understand the basics of social interaction and possess the constructive abilities necessary to work in different groups also in primary school are things that preschool teachers may want to emphasize in their daily work with children.

### **Acknowledgements**

The work presented herein was conducted in partial fulfilment of the first author's doctoral dissertation. This study has been carried out in the Centre of Excellence in Learning and Motivation

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Research and is financed by the Academy of Finland (No. 213486 for 2006–2011) and other grants from the same funding agency (No. 213353 for 2005–2008, and No. 125811 for 2008–2009). The first author is funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation. The second author is funded by the Academy of Finland (No. 136200 for 2010–2012).

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Table 1 Summary of the Analytical Process

<i>Initial Code Analysis Stage 1</i>	<i>Preliminary Themes Analysis Stage 2</i>	<i>Final, definitive Themes Analysis Stage 3</i>
1. Children's decision making	1: Participation allowed	<b>Theme 1:</b> Managing children's peer-relations
2. Peers interacting, teacher's role minor	2: Supported peer interactions	
3. Pair work, teacher's role major	3: Directed peer interactions	
4. Small group work, teacher's role major	4: Together by the rules	<b>Theme 2:</b> Promoting the coherence of the group
5. Fair play	5: Individual and others	
6. Social rules, management	6: Teacher modelling socially appropriate behaviour	<b>Theme 3:</b> Supporting individual child as a part of group
7. Feeling of 'us', 'our way'	7: Being a good friend	
8. Attention given to an individual child	8: Climate	<b>Theme 4:</b> Discussing friendship and respectfulness
9. Teacher modelling politeness	9: Physical proximity	
10. Friendship and respect discussed		
11. Mutual feeling of comfort expressed		
12. Touching, caressing		

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Table 2 Teachers’ Practices and Group Composition, Introducing the Themes

THEME	Theme 1: Managing children’s peer- relations	Theme 2: Promoting the coherence of the group	Theme 3: Supporting individual child as a part of group	Theme 4: Discussing friendship and respectfulness
<i>Theme description</i>	Teacher provides support for learning socially appropriate behaviour within peer-relationships by modelling, sensitively scaffolding, or by directly encouraging children to cooperate.	Teacher aims to keep the group coherent and functioning according to common rules, fairness and the esprit de corps (i.e., the common spirit existing in the group).	Teacher enables the parallel between individual and group work dynamics.	Teacher deals with issues of friendship, respect or empathy as clear themes in the structured learning session.
<i>Composition of the group</i>	Pairs or small groups of less than 4 children	Whole group of children or small groups of more than 5 children	Individual child in relation to the whole group	Whole group
<i>Connecting aspect of social life</i>	Child–child relationships, modelling, management	Social rules, feeling of ‘us’, management, organisation	Individual attention, knowing one’s peers, acceptance	Friendship, empathy, social responsibility
<i>Prevalence (No. of coded extracts within themes)</i>	<i>n</i> = 76	<i>n</i> = 54	<i>n</i> = 29	<i>n</i> = 11
<i>Observed in classrooms</i>	17/20	16/20	15/20	7/20