LAUREA
AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
Uuden edellä

A study of Neo-Humanist kindergarten's physical environment in supporting social skills

Fashina Olabode, Korkeakoski Elisa

2014 Otaniemi

Laurea University of Applied Sciences
Otaniemi

A study of Neo-Humanist kindergarten's physical environment in supporting social skills

Olabode Fashina & Elisa Korkeakoski
Degree Programme in Social services
Bachelor's Thesis
August, 2014

Laurea University of Applied Sciences **Abstract**
Otaniemi
Degree Programme

Olabode Fashina, Elisa Korkeakoski

A study of Neo-humanist kindergarten's physical environment in supporting social skills

Year 2014 Pages 62

The main focus of this study was to examine how a kindergarten's physical environment supports the social skills of negotiation, problem-solving and fairness of children aged five to seven-year-olds.

The study was carried out in a private English neo-humanist kindergarten using qualitative research method, and the data was collected by observing seven children in ten participant observations during free play indoors and outdoors. Data was analysed using interpretative content analysis approach in order to answer the research question of how a kindergarten setting and play materials support children's social skills.

The findings show that kindergarten play props and physical environment support children social skills as they exhibit sufficient level of social skills in interaction with one another indoors and outdoors. However, few anti-social behaviours were also recorded during the use of some play props provided. Findings also emphasize the important role of an adult in the physical environment as propounded by social-constructivists' theory.

In conclusion, recommendations were made on how the practitioners could widen the physical environment to include more play areas and types of play props that could also be introduce to further support children's skills of negotiation, fairness and problem-solving.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Physical environment, Social skills, Play props, Neo-humanist education

Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulu **Tiivistelmä**
Otaniemi
Programme

Olabode Fashina, Elisa Korkeakoski

Neo-humanistisen päiväkodin fyysinen ympäristö sosiaalisten taitojen tukijana

Vuosi 2014 Sivumäärä 62

Tämän tutkimuksen pääasiallisena painopisteenä oli tutkia, kuinka päiväkodin fyysinen ympäristö tukee 5-7-vuotiaiden lasten sosiaalisia taitoja, erityisesti neuvottelu- ja ongelmanratkaisutaitoja sekä reiluutta.

Tutkimus toteutettiin yksityisessä, englanninkielisessä neo-humanistisessa päiväkodissa hyödyntäen laadullista tutkimusotetta. Aineisto kerättiin observoimalla seitsemää lasta vapaan leikin aikana sekä päiväkodin sisä –että ulkotiloissa. Kaikilla kymmenellä aineistonkeruukerralla käytimme osallistuvaa havainnointia tutkimusmetodina. Lopuksi aineisto analysoitiin hyödyntäen tulkinnallista sisällönanalyysia, mikä mahdollisti vastaamisen tutkimuskysymykseen kuinka päiväkotimiljöö sekä leikkirekvisiitat tukevat lasten sosiaalisia taitoja.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että päiväkodin leikkirekvisiitat sekä fyysinen miljöö tukevat lasten sosiaalisia taitoja silloin, kun lapset ilmentävät riittävän tasoisia sosiaalisia taitoja vuorovaikutuksessa toisten lasten kanssa niin sisä- että ulkotiloissa. Joidenkin leikkirekvisiittojen parissa havainnointiin myös epäsosiaalista käyttäytymistä, jolloin tunnistettavissa oli puutteellisia sosiaalisia taitoja.Tulokset korostavat myös sitä, että aikuisella on tärkeä rooli fyysisessä varhaiskasvatusympäristössä, jota myös sosiaalis-konstruktiivinen näkemys puoltaa.

Kehityssuositukset kohdennettiin fyysiseen varhaiskasvatusympäristöön; varhaiskasvatusopettajat voivat laajentaa fyysistä ympäristöä liittämällä mukaan enemmän leikkinurkkauksia ja erilaisia leikkirekvisiittoja, joiden tarkoitus on edesauttaa sosiaalisten taitojen, kuten neuvottelu- ja ongelmanratkaisutaitojen sekä reiluuden tukemista.

Avainsanat: Varhaiskasvatus, Fyysinen ympäristö, Sosiaaliset taidot, Leikkirekvisiitat, Neo-humanistinen kasvatus

Contents

1 Introduction

"The child starting kindergarten this fall will graduate in the third decade of the 21st century. All we can know about the world she will step into is that it will have challenges and opportunities beyond what we can imagine today, problems and possibilities that will demand creativity and ingenuity, responsibility and compassion. Whether this year's kindergarten student will merely survive or positively thrive in the decades to come, depends in large measure on the experiences she has in school. Those experiences will be shaped by adults, by peers, and ultimately by places, by the physical environments where she does her learning." (OWP/P Architects, VS Furniture & Mau Design 2010,1-9)

The above quote illustrates how important a physical environment of an early childhood setting is in the development of children who grew up in it and the high tendencies it has in impacting their holistic development not only to function today, but in the future. In terms of linkage between child's development and environment's settings, environment's social, psychological, physiological and economical factors have an influence on a child's personality and development – an environment enables a child to be an active actor, receiver and explorer (Horelli & Kyttä 2001).

As a new early childhood education and care Act will be published in 2015, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture carried out an internet survey that focused on Finnish parents' opinions about early childhood education in Finland. 11 266 parents answered the survey and shared their thoughts about early childhood services as well as gave improvement suggestions about early years education. Also, children's opinions were heard and taken into account to the survey findings. The findings show, for example, that parents were mostly concerned about appropriateness, healthiness and safety of in – and outside daycare spaces. Moreover, only 39% of the survey respondents thought that kindergartens' environments, materials and equipment are sufficient. On the other hand, children emphasized active working with friends, moving and playing as their top favourite activities. Therefore, they considered day care environment to be an important factor as they evaluated day care environment through activities that they regarded as important to them. Moreover, the survey indicates that potential improvements should concentrate, for example, on supporting children's interactions between each others. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2014).

Furthermore, our interest in kindergarten environments stems from the working experiences in kindergartens that follow different pedagogical approaches. Such experiences have shown us how crucial the environment and the materials provided are in impacting the holistic development of the kids growing in it. This study's elaboration started by the time when the

thesis contract was given to the working life partner, the main objectives of the study were discussed and finally, when the contract was signed by each concerned party.

2 Background of the study

Today, most parents do not have enough time to play or interact with their kids in a meaningful way. The life of an average parent consists mostly of work and other activities that they consider more important than engaging in "play" with their kids. On the other hand, some would want to play with their kids but they are just too tired at the end of the day's work or many children do not even have enough play opportunities at home. "They interact with toys that are not conducive to building imagination and interesting dramatic play themes. In many instances, pretend play with siblings and neighborhood children is not available either. There are more adult-organized and directed activities than in the past. They tend to be in groups of children of the same age rather than in mixed-age groups, which would include older children who could act as "play mentors." (Bodrova & Leong 2003, 156). Curtis & Carter (2003) also support this view when they say that electronic devices and unnatural materials, such as metal, plastic and concrete have a big role in living environments and children's lives nowadays.

In this manner, the importance of the Early Childhood Education physical environment cannot be overemphasized. It becomes increasingly relevant that an ECEC environment should pay attention to a holistic development of children as most kids are spending a major part of a day in kindergartens. The ECEC physical setting should ideally provide a unique setting to foster a kind of free play that will lead to a social maturity which is a bone of this study. This is because there are, for a child, other children to play with, settings which can be organized to accommodate imaginative play and let alone, adults who can encourage the play, as well as guide children to play effectively with each other.

An interview with an early childhood day care manager also pointed out the fact that preschool kids do not necessarily need to be outstanding in learning to read and write before entering elementary school. The manager believes that the most important skills that preschoolers need in preparation for life and elementary school is social and emotional skills such as sitting still, being attentive, active listening, how to win and lose in games and how to follow directions in board games as well. In addition, she also emphasizes the importance of how to be a good friend, including skills such as taking turns, asking questions, learning conflict resolution and taking care of themselves and others. (Tuoriniemi 2013, pers. com) Fawsett also supports the above statement: "Throughout Scandinavia the early years are considered to be much more important for the development of children as *people* rather than as

preparation for becoming *a schoolchild*...The Scandinavians gave higher priority to personal and social development, learning how to learn, and developing self- control" (2009, 37).

The focus of this study is to address how a kindergarten's physical environment, such as setting and play props support children's social skills. The aim is to gather data by observing children through a participant observation and in that way to understand children's way of acting and find a linkage between children's social development and physical environment.

2.1 Working life partner

The working life partner for this thesis is a private English speaking day care. Sunrise kindergarten provides early childhood services for families with children between two and six-year-olds. The kindergarten was founded in 1996, and its educational approach is based on Neo-humanist alternative educational system. The Sunrise kindergarten's goal is to provide a loving and supportive environment in which a full potential of each child can be developed and expressed. Also facilitating a personal, social and language (English) development through interaction with other children and adults is one of the important goals of the kindergarten.

Sunrise kindergarten as at the time of this study has two qualified teachers and 13 kids between the ages of three and seven: 11 full-time kids and two part-time kids. Children in the kindergarten have been divided into three groups: the Ladybug's group which comprises of three and four years old kids, the Rainbow and the Butterfly group which is made up of kids ages five and six respectively. The day care is opened Monday to Friday between 7:45 a.m. and 5 p.m. The curriculum of Sunrise is based on the principle of Neo-humanist education and is taught in a play- based method. It is a creative approach to learning which utilizes story-telling, drama, music, rhythm, arts and crafts, painting, yoga and visualization, meditation, movements and creative play. Every day, the children meditate collectively during morning circle. Meditation is considered as an important aspect of the neo-humanist educational approach as it helps a child to feel harmony with his- or herself and thereby, it enables a child to find inner peace and love. Also, it helps children to relax and concentrate better on activities.

2.2 Aims and objectives of Sunrise

Sunrise kindergarten aims to provide a loving and supportive environment in which a full potential of each child can be developed and expressed. The second objective is to help each child love and appreciate his or her uniqueness and that of others. Thirdly, to introduce basic academic and practical life skills to children during their stay at the kindergarten. The fourth aim is also to facilitate personal and social development through the promotion of co-

operation, morality, responsibility, cleanliness, self-discipline and self-confidence. To develop a sense of aesthetics, and an appreciation of culture through art, dance, drama, music and stories is the fifth aim. Lastly, the kindergarten aims to foster natural, long-lasting curiosity of a child to expand his or her mind with a feeling of universalism.

Sunrise playschool adopts a child-centered approach to their education that pay regard to each child's interests and learning styles. By providing a rich environment and a variety of educational choices, adults help children to direct, develop and expand their interests and unique talents. Sunrise supports children in making their choices, both individually and in a group. Additionally, the kindergarten emphasizes learning by doing-model as many of their activities are experiential.

At Sunrise, a day starts with children going for outdoor play that lasts one hour, teachers and children return around 10 a.m. to start a morning circle. A morning circle which features calling an attendance register and singing month's theme songs. Also, morning circle includes meditation lasting for about 30-40 minutes. Daily meditation and weekly yoga are significant aspects of the kindergarten's routines After that, children disperse to their respective preschool sections for a preschool activity. Lunch time follows at 11:30 and then relaxation at 12 o'clock (lunch is lacto vegetarian diet prepared by the teachers). About 12:40 o'clock, children start their second preschool activity which lasts about one hour and at 14:00, they go for an outdoor free play. Children can play freely either at the playground or the forest nearby depending on teachers' or sometimes children's choice. Children are led back to the kindergarten about one hour later to have an afternoon snack at 15:00. After a snack moment, children have free play inside until parents come to pick them up.

Every month, the teacher responsible for each group, prepares a monthly calendar which revolves around themes such as Fire, Water, Earth, Plants, etc. All the activities designed for a specific month are usually based on the chosen theme for that month. For instance, if the theme is water, activities, such as drama, rhymes, movements, relaxation and field trips will all be planned in such way that it teaches children all they need to know about this exact theme. A monthly calendar is usually ready before or on the first day of the month and will then be given to parents. Such monthly schedule helps parents to know and follow what their kids are learning at the kindergarten.

2.3 Support for the thesis

Support was given by the kindergarten's staff initial acceptance of our proposal to carry out the study at the setting. There was also a periodical discussion with the staff concerning the aims of the study, research methods as well as implementation. Lastly, the working life part-

ner also supported the study through guidance in terms of giving additional information when needed, answering questions and providing literature on neo-humanist education. This study will provide in-depth information for the practitioners about the relationship between a kindergarten environment and children's social development. The findings from this study will also benefit the teachers of Sunrise as it will prompt them to take a closer look at the environment and make necessary adjustments as they consider to be appropriate. Furthermore, our aim is to make some improvement recommendations at the end of the study based on our findings that we hope will be beneficial to the kindergarten practitioners and the children growing in the environment.

3 Environment

Environment is a broad concept and, therefore, it includes a wide range of different components. Nature environment, as well as built environment, are two main essential aspects of an environment. (Korpelainen, Kaukonen & Räsänen 2004) People are constantly interacting with their surroundings. Interpreting an environment is a subjective experience for an individual: memories, feelings and previous experiences of an exact environment specify individuals' perceptions, perspectives and opinions on how people experience the environment in a particular way. (Korpelainen, Kaukonen & Räsänen 2004) As for the role of individual's senses, they have an essential part on creating people's views of the environment; for example physical objects and their coatings, whether soft, sleek, hot or hard, leave a mark on individual's memory. A good environment is defined as workable, safe and aesthetically pleasant. (Korpelainen, Kaukonen & Räsänen 2004)

Tapaninen, Kauppinen, Kivinen, Kotilainen, Kurenniemi & Pajukoski (2002) talk about the linkage between environment and individual's well-being: environments, such as places and spaces have influences on people's mental health and general well-being. As person constantly sense environment through his/her experiences, one often remembers materials, atmospheres, childhood environments and rooms which convey either unpleasant or pleasant experiences for an individual. In addition, Gifford (2002) points out that individuals' backgrounds have an effect on the fact that how people experience their environment. Therefore, such components as an educational level, age, gender and mood have a linkage to individuals' perceptions of the environment. He points out that the environment usually affects people in a long-term rather than immediately in a day-to-day basis. Moreover, Gifford (2002, 74) supports the above statement: "…environment does not usually evoke in us strong, immediate emotions such as rage or ecstacy; it usually has a smaller, but persistent and cumulative influence."

As our study mainly focuses on play materials and kindergarten play spaces, our aim is to examine indoor and outdoor physical environments. Lahti (cited in Ivars 2001) explains that different environmental factors, such as physiological, psychological, social and let alone economical have an influence on a child's development.

3.1 Physical environment of early childhood education

A physical early childhood environment includes components, such as equipment, materials, indoor- and outdoor settings as well as outdoor surroundings. A child living in a physical environment needs to know what kinds of limitations an environment has and how to act in there. Therefore, early childhood physical environment needs to be carefully organized, flexible and fascinating. (Vilén, Vihunen, Vartiainen, Sivén, Neuvonen & Kurvinen 2013) Even though Curtis and Carter (2003, 15) emphasize safety and predictability to be one of essential factors in early years settings, they also point out that physical environment should be flexible as well; materials and play corners should be "moved and rearranged in specific purposes." In addition, Vilén et al. (2013) mention that materials and equipment have an essential role in an early childhood physical environment. It is important to notice that materials and equipment in early years settings should serve pedagogical and developmental purposes to children and, therefore, a child's age and developmental stage are in a crucial position when designing the early years physical environment. Materials should be nicely on display, easily reachable and encourage children for initiative play and work. (2013)

Curtis and Carter (2003, 13-14) list ideal elements that should be considered to take into consideration when structuring an early years physical environment. For example creating sense of community, flexibility in spaces and diversity of materials are some of the components that "shape a positive identity, lasting memories, and learning experiences for children". Particularly open-ended, natural and multi-purpose materials are considered to be beneficial for children's learning.

According to the National curriculum guideline on early childhood education and care in Finland, ECEC is defined as educational interaction taking place in young children's different living environment, aimed at promoting their balanced growth, development and learning. The focus of an ECEC is on a child's holistic development in all areas, such as physical, social, cognitive, emotional and let alone, spiritual. The National guideline also views the ECEC as a systematic and goal-oriented interaction and collaboration, where the child's spontaneous play is a key importance. Even though it is possible to point out here that the curriculum favours a play-based approach in learning and development of a child, it also lays emphasis on goal-oriented interaction between the adults and a child (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland 2004).

ECEC principles drawing from the Finnish basic rights regulations, other legal regulations and policy documents include children's right to a warm, personal relationship, a secured growth, development and learning as well as healthy environment that allows play and a wide range of activities. Additionally, receiving understanding from adults and talking to children in accordance to their age and maturity are regarded as important as above statements. (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland 2004).

Another concept that is emphasized in the ECEC is an environment for various activities in an early childhood setting. The ECEC guidelines states that an environment which is rich, flexible and encouraging to learning, attracts interest and curiosity of children and inspires them to experiment, act and express themselves. In addition, an environment introduces a range of knowledge, skills and experience- based elements into actions involving both children and educators. A well- designed ECEC environment promotes activities in small groups where everyone has an opportunity to take part in discussion and interactions (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland 2004). Also, Horelli and Kyttä (cited in Ivars 2001) lists different aspects that define what is a child-friendly environment. According to them, a child-friendly environment is safe, manageable, stable, flexible, diverse with material selection, aesthetic, nature-friendly as well as suitable for a child's size.

Lastly, on a provision of toys and play materials in an early childhood setting, the ECEC guideline points out that the environment should be resourceful, offering a wide variety of inspiring materials and equipment. Also, practitioners should provide play equipment that are useful, convertible and sufficient in number (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland 2004).

3.2 Creating Rich Physical Environment for Children

If practitioners embrace an idea of an environment as a significant educator in their early childhood programs, Curtis and Carter (2003) believe that practitioners must ask themselves what values they want to represent through learning environments and how they want children to experience their time in the programs. According to them, "it is surprising that recent research on young children's development shows that children grow and learn best in the context of relationships with the people and places that reflects their families, cultures, and communities" (Curtis and Carter 2003, 22). Also, they think that an early childhood profession has positively proved that it has good influences on promoting children's development and individual skills. Such developmental areas are, for example, social-emotional learning, identity development and problem-solving skills. In addition, they want to emphasize the fact that teachers need to be aware of the materials put in the environment; children come from dif-

ferent cultural and family backgrounds, but they also have own individual learning styles which should be taken into account as well.

Bruce (2011) also argues that a quality education includes three elements: child, the context in which learning takes place and content which includes a child's knowledge, understanding and interests. According to Bruce (2011,65) "Material provision, both indoors and outdoors, makes the bones of an environment. Children cannot learn without real, direct first-hand experience. The physical environment needs to be wide ranging, both indoor and outdoor with natural and manufactured objects".

Curtis & Carter (2003) also posit that when practitioners offer children flexible furnishings and open- ended materials, they tend to engage in a range of activities that promote their development and learning - moving, manipulating, investigating, building, representing, creating, communicating and let alone problem-solving. With these kinds of materials, children can develop specific skills, self-awareness and alertness and respect for others around them. They further argue that open-ended materials encourage children to become flexible thinkers and responsive playmates in a play environment.

In fact, many early childhood environments have lots of materials available in their settings, but how do these materials serve the developmental needs of the children? Most importantly, how does a kindergarten physical environment support a child's social developmental needs, which this thesis is all about. Bruce (2011, 66) provides an answer to the above question. She believes that an essential thing for early childhood educators is to remember the following questions: "how will the provision be used to serve the child? and how will it help the adult to help children develop further their ideas, feelings or relationships, movement and embodiment?" She further lays emphasis on "The way that children are helped to develop skills in using what is provided, and the way they are helped to develop competence and mastery and dispositions and attitudes that aid learning, are of crucial importance". Furthermore, Curtis and Carter (2003) emphasize that if early childhood educators want to promote specific skills in children, such as individual thinking, concentration, co-operation and decision-making, a kindergarten setting should be structured in a way that it promotes such wanted skills in children.

Prescott and Kritchevsky (1969) state in their book Environments for Young Children that paying careful attention to early childhood physical environments is important. They advise educators to ensure that a kindergarten setting is a child-friendly in terms of equipment, materials and furniture. Therefore, they criticize "hard, institutional school-like surroundings" which can give a certain impression to individuals, such as "you better shape up and do what this environment requires." As some of the children suffer from stress and emotional prob-

lems these days, physical environment's purpose and opportunities should be taken more seriously. (cited in Curtis & Carter 2011, 22).

On the organisation of the physical setting, Bruce (2011) suggests that the ways in which materials are set out, the range and variety of materials offered, the way adults help children to learn how to use materials, are all important in encouraging children to develop. Also, Curtis and Carter (2003) remind that for educators to promote and develop children's social, cognitive and physical skills, children need to be provided materials that are both traditional and nontraditional. They list different skills, such as co-operation, problem solving and creativity being positively challenged with flexible furnishing and open-ended materials that have various ways of using them.

Studies on the influence of early childhood environment on children's problem behaviours also found a correlation between these two. "Higher quality classrooms in kindergartens are related to higher levels of child engagement, fewer child obeying problems, and better cooperation with peers" (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta 2005). Furthermore, Adams (2009), in her study of preschool aggression within the social context of families, teachers and classroom environment, carried out in the United States found out that teachers playing with children, room arrangement, and sufficient access and availability to play materials are effective in promoting health, social-emotional development in preschool age children. Furthermore, Ivory and McCollum's (1999) carried out a study in order to examine whether the interactive play of young children would be influenced by the types of toy available to them. They observed eight children with disability in an inclusive preschool setting while being exposed to social and isolate toys. They found out that a cooperative play rarely occurred with isolate toys whereas social toys were found out to support more equal balanced in both parallel and cooperative play. They concluded that "Social toys appear to set up social conditions that acts as a natural scaffold for higher level of play" (Ivory and McCollum 1999, 242). In another study conducted by Read, Sugawara and Brandt (1999) on the impact of space and colour in the physical environment on preschool children's cooperative behaviour using Gibson's theory of visual perception, result also indicate that differentiated ceiling height and changes in wall colour can in fact enhance children's cooperative behaviour. The findings from the study of 30 Anglo-American children shows that the cooperative behaviour of preschool children was found to be significantly higher in a space with differentiated ceiling height than in a space with undifferentiated ceiling height and colour.

Dowling points out that outdoor environment is an essential place for children, like indoor environment and in fact, children have a right to explore and experience outdoor environment in early years settings as well. Therefore, practitioners are responsible for ensuring that outside physical environment also provide learning experiences for children, not exclusively

an early years indoor environment. Dowling (2010, 171) points out that "There are rich opportunities for children to grow and develop personally when playing outside…"; she argues that the outdoor environment easily enables children for sensory learning because in the outdoor setting children are more likely to encounter natural things such as trees, sand and plants. Vilén et al. (2013) also support the fact that outdoor environment is beneficial for children's learning. In fact, they argue that children need experiences in an authentic environment and that usually happens outdoors. However, Catling (2005, cited in Alanen & Karila 2009) writes that in England and Finland many kindergartens' outdoor environments are not valued or well-planned. The reason can be in practitioners as they may not consider outdoor environment to be a potential learning place for children as indoors. She also mentions that safety standards are in a big role on shaping kindergarten's outdoors. Dowling (2010, 183) gives concrete ideas on how to gather children to work together outdoors; she emphasizes the importance of natural materials as well as providing transportable resources, such as "different equipment, e.g. for gardening – small forks, watering cans…for windy days- windmills, bubble mixture and wands, paper for making paper planes, small kites…"

3.3 Play in Early Childhood

As it can be seen from the proceeding, play is one of the key concepts of this thesis since it is believed that it offers a real learning and development opportunities for children. Many educators and researchers today and even the Finnish early childhood guidelines emphasize the value of play in a holistic child development.

According to Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier (2010, 350) play is regarded as one of the key activities in an early childhood. To put it simply, through play children learn and develop – play helps children to conceive a world around them. As they say: "A good childhood will involve children in play, wherever they live in the world." Bodrova and Leong (2011,158) also suggest that during preschool years, important changes take place in a very structure of mental processes. When most behaviours are still ruled by "natural" or "lower" mental functions, the first signs of future higher mental functions usually emerges in play and later in other contexts. From the foregoing, it could be assumed that there is more to play than just playing. If children are to have a balanced growth and development, then they should be offered the opportunity to engage in a rich play right from an early childhood. In fact, play becomes their right.

In addition, the national curriculum on early childhood education and care in Finland also suggests that children do not play in order to learn, they learn through play. Play is rather an attitude than an activity of a certain kind, and the same activity may signify play for one child but not for another. As playing is social by nature, peer groups have a significant effect

on the way a playing situation develops. (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland 2004,).

Decades of researchers conclude that play promotes cognitive development, social development, language development, physical fitness and health as well as learning and coping with trauma (Frost, 1997). Frost (2010) also supports the above statement by adding that children's active, spontaneous, lively, improvised games represent and create skills of calculation, strategy, negotiation, imaginativeness, physical skills and creation of rules, and let alone skills of following those rules. He, however, stresses that play that is beneficial to children is play that is active, creative and social, engaging the body in fine and gross motor development, and the mind in negotiation, problem-solving, imagination and flexibility. According to him, play encourages independent thinking, environment building, problem-solving and it provides opportunities to practice new skills and functions.

Indeed, neuroscientists and other medical professions around the world found a link between children's play, physical activity, and brain development. “Free, spontaneous play is associated with improved memory, problem solving, creativity, imagination, representation, and formation of synapses”. (Bruce et al. 2010, Frost 2010). Free play has been described as instruction- and theme-free play; children’s play is, therefore, free from adults’ control and restrictions. Free play enables children to use their play space freely as well as to choose their play themes and toys independently. On the other hand, free play often evokes questions about limitations of freedom: if children need supervision in all conditions, how can free play promote freedom for children? (Rutanen cited in Alanen & Karila 2009, 211-213) Nevertheless, Rutanen (cited in Alanen & Karila 2009) stresses the fact that adults need to pay attention to safety matters also during children’s free plays; even though children are encouraged to play spontaneously during free play, adults’ supervision is still crucial in risk situations.

There are some forms of play that researchers believe that such will help children to develop social skills. “It has been found that children playing with blocks rarely engage in behaviour that is truly antisocial” (Hughes 2010, 96). According to him, block play not only allows unsure or socially immature children to acquire needed social skills by watching the play of more sophisticated peers but also, it can tempt them into increasingly higher levels of social integration. Also, playing games help children to take part in, make sense of and understand their families, communities and cultures. Through games, children experiment with what happens when they break rules, make or change rules and the fact that games also teach children rules themselves. They also learn the rules of greetings, partings, and taking turns. (Bruce, Meggitt & Grenier 2010).

Interestingly, it was also found out that children behave cooperatively while engaged in social-dramatic play, and they may generalize this cooperative attitude to other areas of social integration as well (Hughes, 2010). However, several studies (Bruce 2011; Frost 2010; Broadhead Johnston Tobbell, & Woolley 2010; Bruce, Meggitt & Grenier 2010; May 2011) emphasize the importance of adult support during play and activities. According to them, leaving children to learn without support may leads to low-level play, and there is also a serious problem when children are given adult-directed activities or adult-dominated learning which may hinder children's development of ideas, thinking and creativity.

In contrast, Frost (2010) believe that the lack of play, absence of warmth, early emotional ties with parents, abuse, and devastating conditions of poverty are capable of threatening early brain development and could result in immature social and emotional behaviour, impulsivity, violence, and reduced capacity for later learning.

3.4 Social constructivists view on social skill development

It is significant at this stage to separate the development of social skills from a theoretical perspective. Vygotsky believed that social relationships are at the heart of a child's learning, so his theory is called a social constructivist theory. Furthermore, learning about one's culture, the norms, rules, values, morals, and respect is not done in isolation; children learn all these through interaction with peers and more knowledgeable adults. "It is through others that we develop into ourselves"(Vygotsky 1981, 161 cited in Haenen, Schrijnemakers and Stufkens 2011, 251).

In order to elaborate the social dimension of psychological functioning concretely, Vygotsky developed his well-known notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD). He placed the interaction with adults and more competent peers at the very heart of this zone. ZPD assumes an interaction on a task between a more competent person and less competent person, such that the less competent person becomes independently proficient through collaboration with the adult (Haenen, Schrijnemakers and Stufkens 2011). For example, by being in proximity with parents and teachers, children learn the rules of acceptable behaviour such as saying sorry, raising ones hand to answer questions, turn taking or sharing.

Play is seen as one of the most important ways in which young children can develop child-initiated, self- directed activity (Bruce 2011). Similarly, Pound (2006, 40) mentions that Vygotsky rated children's interaction between themselves as important. In his view, interaction benefits a child when they are helped by another child who knows more about the task.

As stated above, social skills are not learnt by children in isolation, according to Vygotsky, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that can only operate when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers. This means that children learn through socialisation with peers and through imitating adults in an environment. Hence, it can be said that, modelling good behaviour for children becomes very essential because they will automatically believe that what they see adult do is acceptable. In the same manner, Vygotsky believed that when children are involved in imaginative play they will reject what they want, and willingly subordinate themselves to the rules of the game in order to gain the pleasure of the play. He argued that in child-initiated play children exercise their ultimate self-control (Bruce 2011). Vygotsky in his studies, however, limited the scope of play to the dramatic and make-believe play typical of preschoolers and children of primary school age. His definition of play does not include many kinds of other activities such as movement activities, object manipulations, and explorations that were (and still are) referred to as play by educators as well as non-educators. (Bruce 2011).
It is, however, important to note the limitations of Vygotsky's theory, even though he stresses relationship with adults and other children in the acquisition of learning, he places more emphasis on cognitive development. Bruce (2011) argues that Vygotsky might as well puts more emphasis on cognition, but affect is also important in his theory. He opines that the satisfaction and enjoyment of playing with others and the closeness of an adult/child partnership, are not actually cognitive. Pound (2006, 40) on the other hand thought that "For Vygotsky, social and cognitive development work together because he emphasizes the importance of families, communities and other children."

Pound (2006) also critiques Vygotsky's theory for emphasising only the nurture side of learning (the impact of others and the scaffolding they offer to learning). He argues that there is not enough emphasis on children's role in their own development- nature of learning, the role played by the developmental process and the child's own personality. Vygotsky was also criticized based on his methodologies. Much of his work was not based on empirical evidence but were untested ideas or hypotheses.

The views of social constructivist about social development in children is closely linked to that of the Interactionism, propound by Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804). According to him, one's experiences (the content of our learning) are formed through the senses. He calls this a posteriori learning, which depends on experience. Seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and movement feedback and one's mind then process what is experienced, giving order and understanding through the concepts in the mind. (Bruce 2011)

Unlike the social constructivist, this approach integrates empiricism and nativism, recognising that there are biological tendencies to develop movement, communication, language, repre-

sentation, symbol use, attachment to people, and so on, in children. There is also a heavy emphasis on the social-cultural context in which the child grows up, comprising people and cultural and physical environment. It stresses that people are important, both children and adults. Sometimes one leads and sometimes another (Bruce 2011).

4 Social skills

Being an extrovert and social person does not necessary mean that one has good social skills. Social skills can include a variety of abilities from emotional intelligence to cooperation. Developing social skill is essential as it enables an individual to be socially aware and skilled; one learns social rules and skills all the way from an early childhood to adulthood, and it is a continuous process. In addition, having good social skills enables one to be well-prepared for school, work and let alone, create relationships in life. Good social skills promote a child's self-regulation and school readiness; self-regulation is often a necessary component to creating positive relations with other people and to succeed in learning. (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong & Gomby 2005).

Lynch and Simpson (2010, 3) define social skills as "…behaviors that promote positive interaction with others and the environment." Also, they list different kinds of skills that are referred to social skills, such as negotiation, being empathic, problem-solving, generosity, participating in group activities and let alone communicating with others (Lynch & Simpson 2010, 3). Kauppila (2011) states that in an educational field there are basic social skills all individuals should be able to use. Some of the basic social skills are listening, communication skills, asking and enquiring an advice, asking for help and giving and receiving a compliment. Whereas advanced social skills are, for example, cooperative skills, joining and working in a group, giving instructions as well as assertiveness.

According to Csoti (2001), respect is the key component when one talks about social skills; that includes both respecting other's opinions, cultures, ethnic backgrounds, religious and also, respecting him/herself. Also, she adds "Social skills are being sensitive to others and respecting them in the way that one relates to them" (Csoti 2001, 16). Keltikangas-Järvinen (2010) states that social skills are often associated with being social, but that is a misleading fact; being social is a desire to be with other people whereas having good social skills are referred to the ability to be with each other. Also, an interesting aspect is that social skills are not innate, but one can achieve them by learning. (Keltikangas-Järvinen 2010).

Kauppila (2011, 135) mentions that adopting social skills is not time-limited; learning social skills depends on a child's linguistic learning stage as well as abilities to communicate. Therefore, one cannot set strict criteria on when a child will accomplish a particular social skill. He also lists typical social skills components which can usually be observed in an early childhood:

such emphasized social skills among children are, for example, helping each other's, sharing and cooperating, expressing own feelings, working in a group and joining a play. (Kauppila 2011)

4.1 Children and social development

Social development includes elements, such as being part of a community, development of interaction skills and ability to participate and join groups. Social development is a process when an individual adopts community's features, such as knowledge, values, norms, attitudes and habits. Particularly early attachments and relationships are the key bases for a child's social development. (Kronqvist & Pulkkinen 2007) It is essential to pay attention to two aspects: a child is a social person all the way from birth; she/ he has natural tendency to be in contact with people. Also, cultural environment influences on an individual's social development, such as values and norms (Kronqvist & Pulkkinen 2007).

"Developmental 'norms' are the sequential steps through which all children can be expected to progress. Typically these are considered under headings such as physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development…" (Fawsett 2009, 47). Needless to say, paying careful attention to a child's social development is as crucial as to take into account other developmental areas as well. Nevertheless, looking at children's social development from the perspective of our study, it is necessary to take into consideration particular social developmental norms which children go through during age five to seven years.

A child's first six years are crucial for his social development. Children tend to absorb environment's signs of interactions (Dowling 2010). Dowling (2010) argues that according to researches, a child's first six-seven years are essential for a child to develop social skills. He mentions that a child age of four should already be able to cope with peer interactions. Nurmi, Ahonen, Lyytinen, Lyytinen, Pulkkinen and Ruoppila (2006) also state that between ages three and six, children develop social skills quickly.

During ages five and six children are often able to manage peer-to-peer interaction; other children's opinions and suggestions are taken into account, objects and materials are shared and turn-taking can be handled. (Nurmi et al. 2006) A five-year-old can solve problems together with other children, but adults' help is still needed at times. In addition, a five-year-old child usually knows which matters can make someone sad but can still behave in an egoistic way. (Vilén, Vihunen, Vartiainen, Sivén, Neuvonen & Kurvinen 2013) Moreover, a five-year-old child is usually aware of fair play and some of the social rules; she/he is more sociable and is able to choose his/her own friends.

A six-year-old is able to work in a group and follow certain rules, but still, adults' support is needed in some situations; they can be quite demanding in different situations and, therefore, that can cause more disagreements among kids. Also, a six-year-old child understands well social situations and can express his/her opinions aloud. Usually a child aged of six has already adopted considerable number of attitudes and values from caregivers and teachers. (Vilén et al. 2013)

On the other hand, six years of age refers to a child's ability to have more understanding of social rules and how and when to show/ hide feelings. At the age of seven, children may seek more for "peer approval" and they may appreciate more alone time at times than being in a group all the time. (Hobart & Frankel 2009) Bruce, Meggitt & Grenier (2010, 144) notice that as children five to seven years of age develop broader concept of social life, kids also start to understand different social aspects, such as differences between social rules and moral values. But Nurmiranta, Leppämäki & Horppu (2009) argue that even though a seven-year-old child is able to play in big groups, she/he can be quite selfish and vicious at times.

In order to understand and examine children's social development and promote their social skills, one can converse on different stages that effect on children's social development. Moreover, Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman & Whiren (2011) address that to be aware of children's social learning, one should pay attention to "Social Pyramid" and its four stages as figure 1 illustrates it. Each stage has influences on a child's social learning: the first and the most important step is positive relationships which refers to human interactions, the second step is supportive environments which emphasize children's physical environment elements, the third step is targeted at teaching and coaching and the last one concerns intensive individualized interventions. The purpose of the individualized interventions is to promote a child's social skills and take notice of challenging behavior. Paying attention to each stage can promote children's social-emotional development and support appropriate behavior, such as children's social skills. (Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman & Whiren 2011)

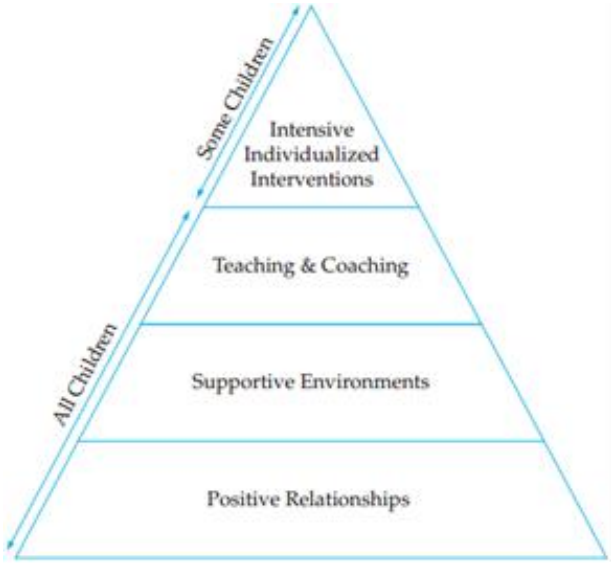

Figure 1: Social Pyramid
(Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman & Whiren 2011, 23)

Also as Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph & Strain (2003) state "Good relationships are key to effective teaching and guidance in social, emotional, and behavioral development." Therefore, a good relationship between children and adults is crucial as it enables children to build positive self-concept and confidence. Also, a feeling of safety enhances appropriate behavior and consequently lessens the challenging behavior.

Supportive environments are as essential to promoting children's social development as positive relationships between caregiver and child. This phase focuses on physical environment settings that include, for example, learning spaces and environmental elements, such as materials, colors and light. "Well-planned early learning settings enable children to interact comfortably, help children behave in socially acceptable ways, and give them opportunities to practice social skills associated with self-regulation." (Kostelnik & Grady 2009 cited in Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman & Whiren 2011, 24). In addition, the stage of supportive environments is the focus of our study as we will observe a linkage between used materials during free play and children's used social skills while playing

4.2 Social skills and environment

An early childhood education environment plays a vital role when it comes to children's way to learn social actions. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) remind that children are curious in minds and actively sense what happens around them; therefore, children develop their understanding of surroundings by acting on objects, communicating with other people and exploring things. Therefore, as children are referred to be active learners, in early years settings a crucial emphasis is on learning by doing rather than hearing or talking: concretely practicing for example turn-taking while playing can be more instructive than an adult telling a child that he/she should take turns.(Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman & Whiren 2011)

In addition, one should not forget human interactions' meaning for a child's social skills learning. A child can learn social skills both in informal and formal ways: one benefits from given instructions, such as when to mention "Thank you" or "Please" to someone, yet, one learns social skills from observing others in social situations. As an illustration, social skills could often be learned through imitation and adaptation. A child may not be capable of observing or adopting necessary social skills from the environment, therefore, significance of adults' position as role models and teachers increase. (Csoti 2001, 17) Also, children's interaction with other children as mentioned above, for example, play is important as it enables children to communicate naturally with one another and learn social skills. According to Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care guidelines (2003), a play gives an opportunity for a child to learn for example empathy, language and social skills in general.

4.3 Negotiation, problem-solving and fairness

As social skills are a very broad phenomenon, this current study focused on three main social skills. These are the skills of negotiation, problem-solving, and fairness and this choice is justified based on children's current developmental stage, future education and their emphasis in neo-humanist education. Children aged five to seven have often developed a wider conception of such social skills as negotiation, problem-solving and fairness than younger children. Also, neo-humanist education highlights the importance of social skills in individuals. The neo-humanist approach strives for children to think such questions as: "How should I communicate?", "How should I act?" and "How do I solve problems?"(Bussey cited in Rama Ac 2000, 36). Moreover, children aged five to seven are soon heading to a primary school; Kauppila (2011, 142) states that children who possess good social skills at school will succeed in learning. Lack of effective social skills can lead to problems at schools. Thus, social skills teaching should already start at the early stage of human developing. (2011)

Shaw (2013) points out that a fairness includes such elements as sharing, generosity and reciprocity. Also, being an unselfish person is part of fairness. Often the purpose of fairness is to act in a way that it leads to cooperation and good interaction. According to Broadhead, Johnston, Tobbell and Woolley (2010) respect is the central part of fairness; children's actions and words can tell people whether they are fair to each other or not. Moreover, Dowling (2010) talks about equity and tolerance in the context of fairness; she mentions that children regularly encounter such social situations that are linked to fairness. Johnson and Johnson instead (2014) lists sharing, equal use and turn-taking into fairness. They also link such factors to fairness as inclusion of other people and helping without expecting any return service.

Negotiation is described by Johnson and Johnson (2014, 374) as follows: “Process by which persons who have shared and opposed interests want to come to an agreement to try work out a settlement.” Also, they state two types of negotiations: integrative and distributive. Integrative negotiation is more constructive and usually beneficial than distributive negotiation. The purpose of integrative negotiation is to let know the other side what is the thing you want and how you feel. Also, exchanging standpoints is essential in negotiation.

Crick and Dodge (1994, 168 cited in Rubin, Bukowski and Laursen 2011) talk about the importance of kindergarten children’s problem-solving skills; they emphasize the fact that children must learn to “analyze social situations, set social goals, determine effective ways to solve peer conflict…”. Johnson and Johnson (2014) state that problem-solving skills includes elements as sharing and delivering own ideas, experiences and opinions to other persons. They also highlight the fact that in order to solve a problem, creative and imaginative skills are often needed.

In order to know the definitions of each three social skills, we examined their descriptions based on the above literature. Hence, descriptions of the three social skills guided us to create an observational manual that helped us to do our ten observations. The observational guide contains some of the relevant descriptions from literature and also, it includes additional description points of the three social skills that we considered to be related to the descriptions and let alone, to be significant to our observational data. Appendix 2 illustrates the observational manual that was used as a help during observations.

5 Neo-humanism

Neo-humanist education was first originated by Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1921-1990). He examined different aspects of human life, from childhood to adulthood and for example stood for a rights-based society. Moreover, he saw an early childhood as a “critical period in which the human being’s basic world outlook is being shaped, and in which such a holistic paradigm is most easily nurtured.”(Devapriya 2011, 20)

The Neo-humanist approach is administered by the Ananda Marga Gurukula Network. Ananda Marga is a global spiritual and social service organization founded in 1955 (Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar). The mission of Ananda Marga is self-realization (individual freedom) and service to humanity (collective welfare): the fulfilment of the physical, mental and spiritual needs of all people. Ananda Marga has a large network of volunteers in 120 countries with over 1000 kindergartens and primary schools worldwide. Its social programs include disaster relief, schools, children's homes, medical clinics, refugee support, sustainable community development projects and other short or long-term projects, which help people to be self-sufficient. Ananda

Marga, which means “Path of Bliss”, is also a spiritual movement dedicated to the all-round promotion of the human condition—physical, mental and spiritual. Its missionary workers concentrate on social service, and are trained to teach yoga and meditation.(online webpage on Ananda Marga Gurukula Global Education Network for People and Planet)

According to the working life partner, kindergartens established by this organization are run by Nuns and Monks called Didis and Dadas who are members of the Ananda Marga Gurukula Network. They can be sent to any country to manage social service establishment of the organisation if a need arises and if they have a qualification to be in such capacity. Neo-humanistic approach has its own curriculum designed for its kindergartens that Sunrise is also using together with the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum. The curriculum known as “Circle of Love Curriculum” is very detailed, and it emphasizes the values of Neo-humanism.

Figure 2 illustrates Inayatullah et al.’s (2006) point of view about Neo-humanist education; it seeks to expand the frames of knowledge people use to construct their world, going beyond tribal, religious, national and even civilizational levels. Neohumanism does not create a new compromise between uni and multi; rather, it creates a new reality.

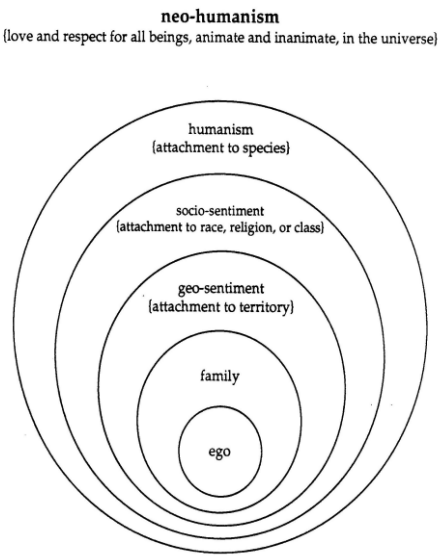

Figure 2: The Liberation of the Intellect
(Inayatullah, Bussey & Milojevic 2006, 5)

5.1 Neo-humanistic approach and social skills

”Neo-humanist education offers a holistic response, as it is designed to equip children with the flexible thinking, creative imagination, self-regulation skills, and sense of spiritual connection to the world and those around them that children need to effectively face the 21st century” (Devapriya 2011, 20). The most emphasized factors in neo-humanist education focus on respecting everyone, regardless of race, religion or culture and also, giving sense of love and compassion for all beings: people, animals, plants and even the inanimate matter of the whole universe. (Online webpage of Sunrise Finland- Neo-Humanist Education 2003)

Neo-humanist values include good social skills: values, such as non-violence, justice, respect and friendship are emphasized in neo-humanist education. (Rathwell 2000) In addition, non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing and universal love are appreciated values and highlighted through a child’s social growth in a neo-humanist approach: “Children express these principles in their lives by learning to play co-operately and by understanding how to give and take.” Also, she mentions “Any small group activity where children co-operate and share with others supports ethical and social development.” (Nivedita 2000, 67) The endeavor is to take into consideration other human beings, animals and also inanimate objects in neo-humanist education.

Environment’s influences are often underlined when it comes to children’s social development. Therefore, adults’ role in children’s social learning is regarded essential factor in neo-humanist education: “…children develop moral characters by following the example adults set. Children constantly watch adults for cues as to what to do and how to act.” (Nivedita 2000, 66) A neo-humanist educator is expected to be a great ethical role model as well as to be aware of his/her own moral values he/she is teaching: “For a child learns good social skills, similarly as he or she learns morality, through a good role model that demonstrates patience, kindness and care.” (Nivedita 2000, 67)

5.2 Neo-humanism and environment

Environment plays a significant role in neo-humanist education. In order to obtain harmony between individuals, neo-humanist education strives to create supportive, incentive and welcoming environment – the purpose is to respect other human beings as well as surroundings around people. (Volpe cited in Rama Ac. 2000) Alister (cited in Rama Ac. 2000) emphasizes that the environment has a meaningful effect on individuals. However, he argues that a psychic environment influences more on human beings than physical one; in neo-humanist education psychic environment can be encountered and experienced through meditation and yoga. On the other hand, Mitra (cited in Rama Ac. 2000) writes about outdoor environment’s opportunities and its meaningfulness; children can concretely experience nature’s changes, explore different nature creatures as well as learn to take care of outdoor environment. Also, Mitra

emphasizes the sense of place in a neo-humanist education. He compares indoor and outdoor environments and their selections; outdoor environment is seen more as a potential learning area as it can provide natural and real objects for people. On the contrary, indoor environment can lack experiential learning and naturalness as materials are often replaced with artificial objects, such as plastic materials and electronic devices.

Environmental aspect is highly valued in neo-humanist approach, therefore, the aim is to provide individuals a "living" learning place that enables human beings to explore and learn through concrete and natural experiences. Mitra (cited in Rama Ac. 2000, 52) mentions that places of learning play a significant role in fostering children's enthusiasm towards education: "…the children can develop an intimate and organic relationship with a particular place" if they have a chance to utilize both indoors and outdoors in learning.

6 Qualitative research

6.1 Conducting the study

The primary interest of this study was to find out what kind of role early years setting has in a child's life in supporting social skills. Therefore, the focus was on children's behaviour as well as on their opinions about their current kindergarten setting.
In order to achieve the above objectives, we used qualitative research methods to help us in examining our main research problem. Often qualitative research focuses on particular detailed aspects, such as people's understandings and interactions which can enable " 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data." (Silverman 2005, 9-10). Hence, our primary aim was to use participant observation as our research method because in this way we had better access to encounter observed people's actions and, therefore, research methods, such as observation could provide detailed findings for us (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, cited in Silverman 2005).

Choosing qualitative research to guide our study was more potential research alternative than a quantitative one. As for the research setting, a researcher's role and general research structure, a quantitative research would not have worked as well as qualitative one in this study. For this study, we conducted our research in a kindergarten. We collected research data both inside the kindergarten as well as outside at the kindergarten playground. One of the features of qualitative research is often to implement the research in a natural setting whereas quantitative research happens more in artificial situations (Bryman 2008).

As our study was implemented through participant observation and our target group was children, researcher's role became prominent in a research setting. It is typical to be closely involved in qualitative research environments; such involvement enables researcher to understand participants' social life better. However, quantitative research would not have ensured us similar opportunities to encounter participants as it is often described to have detached relationship with research participants. Often questionnaires are used in quantitative research what cause usually lack of contacts between a researcher and participant. In contrast, qualitative research strategy evokes questions about obtaining subjective data whereas quantitative research can be able to gain objective information. (Bryman 2008)

In addition, quantitative research concentrates more on measurements than words; the emphasis is more on a statistical outcome that aspires to answer such question as: "…why things are the way they are.". A qualitative research strategy answers rather question: "…how things are…". (Bryman 2008, 156, 393) As qualitative research is more unstructured approach than qualitative one, qualitative method enabled us to collect data "freely" based on participant observation method we used; for example questions were asked spontaneously from participants whenever it was the right moment.

6.2 Participant observation

According to Bryman (2008, 402), "Participant observation draws attention to the fact that the participant observer immerses him or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviours, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworkers, and asking question." Patton (2002, 21) also posits that "to understand fully the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method." Situations can contain variety range of elements, such as "social actions, behavior, interactions, relationships, events…Experiential, emotional and bodily dimensions may also be part of the frame." (Coffey 1999, cited in Mason 2004, 84). Participant observation as a method also enabled us to experience the context of the observation situation; a context includes, for example, such matters as people, physical environment and settings. Therefore, we had better access to the context by observing research participants in a natural setting where people generally act. (Vilkka 2006)

Patton (2002) states that participant observation can include natural interviewing at the same time while observing target people: "…the participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening." Also, Mason (2004) supports above description: "…it is common for an observer to conduct interviews with participants in a setting- sometimes spontaneously, sometimes in a

planned way…". Acquiring a deeper view for our findings we asked open-ended questions from the observed children. "In human service and education programs that serve children, the evaluator cannot participate as a child but may be able to participate as a volunteer, parent, or staff member in such way as to develop the perspective of an insider in one of those adults roles." (Patton 2002, 266)

One of the greatest strength of participant observation is the comprehensive nature of its perspective. As a researcher "live" the experience, the richness of data can be captured in the description of the experience, as well as in the identification of discrete variables and their relationships (Grigsby 2010, 428). Furthermore, he believes that while carrying out direct observation, behavior or set of behaviours might be observed, counted, and measured in duration and have some meaning ascribed to them. Such research method suggests a detached view from the population of a study because the researcher is watching rather than taking part. Whereas participant observation on the other hand prefers clearly the subjective experience of the researcher as it would be encountered and explored as well. In other words, the researcher works to maintain the role of being 'inside and outside' the experience simultaneously. (Grigsby 2010)

Another advantage of participant observation is that participants are less likely to change behaviours because of the researchers' presence if that researcher spends a sustained amount of time in the social setting. As a researcher blends into the background, participants may minimize the presence of a researcher and sometimes forget that a researcher is present. On the other hand, the challenge for participant observation is to maintain objective researcher role while doing observation. Even though participant observation enables researcher to be an insider in an observation setting, "At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider." (Patton 2002, 268)

Thus, typically, participant observers will gather further data through interviews and the collection of documents". (Grigsby 2010, 428) However, Grigsby (2010, 425) believes that participant observation is anything but 'objective,' whereas, observation (alone) could take place with a very high degree of objectivity. Participant observation uses the subjective experience of the researcher to gain a better understanding of social phenomena.

Participant observation is judged to be the best data collection technique for this study because observers can get first-hand experiences within the context of the samples. Furthermore, as the focus of the study is to observe children's behaviours and interactions within a natural environment, and also to interact with them and ask clarifying questions during free play, participant observation becomes a preferred method of data collection against direct observation.

6.3 Data collection

The participants of this study are made up of a representative sample that reflects the population accurately (Bryman 2008). The sample size consists of five boys and two girls between the ages of five and seven years. This age group is considered to be a representative sample for this thesis since the study revolves around finding out how a kindergarten setting and play props support kids' social skills. Sheridan (2009) states that, at the age of five, kids can play cooperatively with peers most of the time and understands a need for rules and fair play. A total of seven children participated in the study and they are from different cultural background such as Finland, Hungary, India and Thailand. The kindergarten staff could not provide us with the date of enrolment of the children for ethical reasons, but they have been together in the kindergarten for at least one academic year.

The description of the indoor and outdoor settings is an important part of the study because it helped us to analyze our data and outline the whole picture of the kindergarten's physical environment. There are two playrooms in Sunrise kindergarten, a big room and a smaller one. In the big playroom, there are two children's computers on the other side of the room. Two child-sized chairs are placed in front of each computer. In addition, there are two child-sized tables and many chairs around the tables in the room. Walls are rounded by shelves (tall and short ones) which, most of them have see-through plastic boxes of arts and crafts materials/stuff, paints, play props and teachers' folders on them. All the play props are inside the boxes. There is a quite big empty space in the middle of the big playroom, covered by two big carpets. In addition, there is an aquarium in the room. A tall bookshelf is close by its "entrance door." There are puppets on the top of the bookshelf.

There are short colourful and wooden shelves against two walls in a small playroom. On one side of the room, there are tall white cabinets where children's nap time mattresses are kept. On the short shelves, there are see-through plastic boxes full of different kinds of play props (from construction bricks and Legos to soft toys). Apart from the shelves and boxes, there are one wooden play microwave, oven and a wooden doll's bed (a couple of dolls in it with some clothes). Walls are covered with different information posters in the small playroom (about shapes, musical instruments, insects, safety and stories).

In addition, there are two playgrounds outdoors: a spider park and a snake park. A spider playground is protected by fences. This playground includes such play props as one huge swing (called a spider swing), a jungle gym that consists of a slide and a climbing frame. There is also a rather large sandbox in the spider playground that has two child-sized playhouse shelters and two mushroom-like tables in it. There is one wooden rocking elephant nearby the swing. Also, one small storage is placed close to the gates. In the storage house,

there are Sunrise kindergarten's two plastic boxes of play props. On the opposite side, there is another park referred to as snake park by children. This playground has open space (much bigger than spider playground) and does not have any fence around it. There are two swings (for one child at a time), four merry-go-round equipment, two wooden rocking horses, a small slide, a climbing frame, a moving balance board, chin-up bars and small child-sized tables with a storage box for play props.

The participant observation was carried out during April and May. As the study focused partly on kindergarten's environment, five observations were done indoors and five observations outdoors at the kindergarten playground. Participant observation took place during children's free play and, therefore, we needed to arrange observations based on the kindergarten's daily schedule. Participant observations were dated as follows; indoor and outdoor observations were always carried out in the afternoons (at 14:00-15:00 and 15:30-16:30) apart from two times when outdoor observation information was collected in the mornings (around at 9:00-10:00). Usually indoor and outdoor observations happened in different days, except one time when two observations were placed in one day. The target children were always observed approximately one hour by two observers. However, since there are two playrooms in the kindergarten, some observed children occasionally moved to another room and that means one of the observers had to move with them in order to keep on recording their activities. At other times, because indoor observations usually started at 15:30, few kids were picked by parents about 30-40 minutes into the observation on two occasions. Observations themes also differed from some days to other days; on some days, we observed more social skills and the use of varied play props as documented in our logs while at other times, not much social skills were observed.

At the beginning of our participant observation, we thought about how we, as participant observers, are influencing children's decision-making on choosing which play room to play in or deciding which play prop to choose. Our observation usually started right after when children were finishing their snack in the lunch room. Thus, we decided to either stay in the lunch room or teachers' room until all the children have left the lunch room and taken their positions in their preferred playroom. On two occasions, children came to the room where we were and started to play with the same play prop as the previous day.

The used observation technique for this study was a written record. Therefore, a notebook and pen were the only tools needed when carrying out the observations. Also, Bryman (2008, 419) states that usually in participant observation, the key equipment "will be a note pad and pen…". Other observational equipment would have helped to collect relevant data to our study, such as a recording device but to respect the working life partner's wishes, additional observation equipment was not, therefore, used.

As the participant observation enabled us to move freely in the kindergarten's environment during our observations, we needed to take into account different ways to gather data and write field notes. Bryman (2008) recommends to write field notes at the same time when relevant social situations occur but this can be a challenge in participant observation. He notices that constant field note writing in a participant observation setting can disturb informants and cause "the risk of making people self-conscious." (Bryman 2008, 417). Therefore, we implemented the observations in such a way that we placed note pads at different places at the kindergarten's settings and we also carried note papers in our pockets. We just wrote down the key words and quotes in the observation setting instead of spending too much time writing the field notes. Lofland and Lofland as well as Sanjek (1995 & 1990, cited in Bryman 2008, 420) describe previous note taking method as "jotted notes". Such technique aspires to avoid making notes in front of participants in order to achieve the objectives of participant observation.

Our participant observation consisted of listening, observing, discussions, playing as well as assisting moments with kids. The aim was to obtain true data as well as to take into account of free play's purpose: free play should be spontaneous, unlimited as well as unplanned and most importantly, it should be created by children (Alanen & Karila 2009). If we noticed that two or more participant children started to play together, we usually joined them because we assumed that playing in pairs or a bigger group would evoke some kind of interaction in children. Also, interactions between children were a potential source of information for our study; thus, we focused on group players rather than solitary players during our participant observations. Being aware of what happens around the setting, required us to have sufficient skills to observe whether it was the right moment to join a group of children immediately or not. As our study's focus is on social skills and physical environment, we mainly paid attention to participant children's interactions between each others and the play props they were using during their free play. Therefore, we did not set any strict criterion on what exactly should be written down – we collected data naturally whenever we thought the right and potential data occurred. Even though we had our observation manual as a guide, we also collected data outside the scope of the manual if such data was considered to be relevant to our study.

6.4 Data analysis

The next important step in this study was to analyse the data obtained from the participant observation in field notes. As stated by Kathleen, DeWalt & Billie (2011, 179), "the goal of data analysis is the summarisation of large quantities of data into understandable information from which well-supported and well argued conclusions are drawn". Another definition proposed by Naughton and Hughes (2010) explains better the process of analysing participant

observation data. They see data analysis as the process of organizing and sifting data, then looking for and mapping any patterns or regularities in data as a way to interpret it.

The method of analysis adopted in this study was qualitative content analysis with an interpretative approach. Content analysis is a technique of reducing and condensing raw interview data into core consistencies, patterns, themes and categories (Patton 2002). It comprises of searching out underlying themes in the materials being analysed (Bryman 2008). Additionally, taking an interpretative approach to the analysis allows researchers to treat social action and human activity as text expressing layers of meaning (Berg & Lune 2012).

There are three sets of activities taking place in the process of data analysis as opined by Miles & Huberman (1994a cited in DeWalt & Billie 2011): data reduction (focus on specific questions, coding, preliminary analysis into scales and indices), data display (tables and statistical tests) and interpretation as well as verification (getting hunches, leaping to conclusions, building the argument). The process of data collection for this study started before the field work, and it was ongoing throughout the observation period. According to DeWalt & Billie (2011, 181-182) “In some sense the process of data reduction begins long before data collection begins, even before fieldwork begins. The theoretical approach taken by the researcher influences the kinds of phenomena that are deemed important to the enterprise. The researcher focuses on a particular sets of issues and places others in a lower priority. The choices made about the event to observe, what activities in which to participate and with whom to speak limit the amount and content of data that will be collected”.

At the conception stage of this study, we decided to investigate how early childhood physical environment support social skills development in preschool children and further reorganize the social skills to three categories which are negotiation, problem solving and fairness. To this effect, an observation manual was developed with checklists of what the observers would pay attention to under the three categories during observation. The observation guide was based on theoretical approach and review of the literature. Thus, the manual serves as a guide in the observation process as recording were made based on the criteria already identified. “Data reduction also takes place during the act of recording field notes, the research reduces the observed phenomena to a finite number of pages of field notes”. (DeWalt & Billie 2011, 182).

After the observation, the observers generated comprehensive fieldnotes which were thoroughly read through to get a general understanding of the text. After that fieldnotes were exchanged and re-read, compared and further reduced to manageable descriptions of patterns of activities, ideas and behaviours to answer our research question (DeWalt & Billie 2011). To organize data into categories, we started coding by looking for and labelling reoc-

curring themes in the field notes, “codes can simplify and standardise data ready for analysis” (Naughton & Hughes 2010, 174).

To this end, an observation log was created, and we thoroughly examined kids' conversations and demeanors one after the other, one day at a time, and group them under identified social skill, and in the process seven themes were identified. The themes include negotiation, leadership in play, problem solving, fairness, teachers' role, aggression, and sharing. These seven themes were further agreed to be condensed under five sub- themes that are negotiation, problem-solving, fairness, role of teacher and solving problem wrongly as will be enumerated in the findings session. Additionally, we highlighted the play props that kids were playing with while these categories were identified. We also took cognizance of the used play prop and how it supports or not support social skills.

In order to avoid overlapping in the process of coding we followed the advice of Naughton & Hughes (2010, 175), “to ensure validity of coding is a four-stage process, first, list your categories, secondly, define each category so that you are clear what it includes and excludes, thirdly, identify the rules by which you assign content to a category and lastly, provide an example of each category, so that others can check how you have categorised your data.” The observation manual was used as a checklist in coding data under relevant category since it fulfills the first three steps of the above suggestion, and then, kids’ conversations and play scenarios were included to the findings to support each category. The data was further made into a visual representation (flow chart) in order to make sense of it at a glance such as what play props children were playing with and what is in the environment where social skill (for example negotiation) occurs as shown below.

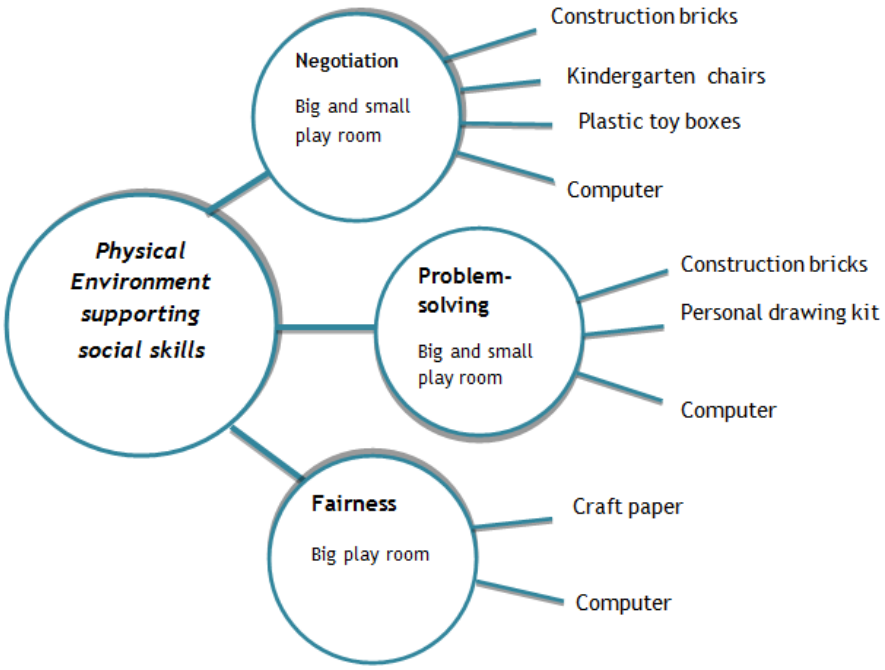

Figure 3: Process of interpreting indoor data

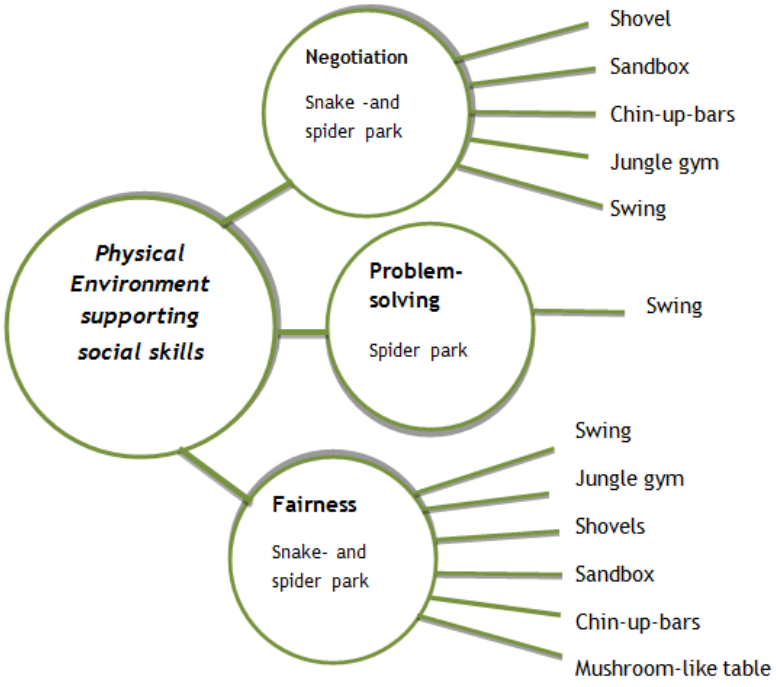

Figure 4: Process of interpreting outdoor data

7 Findings

The purpose of this study was to find out how the environment and play props provided in an early childhood setting support the development of skills of negotiation, problem-solving and fairness of kids in it. The findings of the participant observation carried out will be enumerated under these three categories and sub-divided into indoor and outdoor environment. This section will also discuss other themes that came up during the progress of the observations.

7.1 Negotiation during free play

In accessing the skill of negotiation in kids, we pay attention to how kids are making decision together, exchanging ideas, asking and giving permission to join play, compromising willingly, expressing interest and explaining why to others. The following play scenarios illustrate kids' negotiation skills and the play props they were playing with as at the time negotiations occur.

Indoor

The following three scenarios arose while kids were playing game on a computer:

Six observed children gather around the computer watching a computer game being played by one of them:

G1: "Can I ?" (G1 wants to do something on the computer)
B1: "Yes"
G1 : "Can I colour…?"
G2: "I've got an idea …if you…can you do that?"
"Are you sure this is the easiest level?"
G2 to B1: "Can I choose this next one?"
B1 to G2: "Which one?"
G2 to B1: "This one" (and points to the screen)

B2 to B1: "Can I do that, pleeeease…, can I do that?"
B1 to B2: "Make it then" (let B1 to colour one thing)

On another observation day, one of the observed boys heads to the big play room and places himself in front of the computer (using the same computer as before). Observed girl heads to the computer as well and asks boy: "Can I play with you?" boy answers "Yes".

Observation also reveals that some of the kids negotiate and accept the other person's decision even though it may not be favourable.

Two boys and a girl say they want to build a snake house. The game was introduced by one of the boys. They take few kindergarten chairs to make a barricade around one of the computers in the big room to build their snake house:

G2 to boys: "Can I play with you"
B3 to G1: “No, this is my game and it is only for three persons and we already have girl1…sorry.”
G2 went to do something else.

It was surprising that even while the boy was explaining to her, he said 'sorry' in an apologetic way, and the girl in question left with a smile on her face.

Children also negotiate roles during play. There are times when roles are simply given by the one who initiates the play and the others are willing to accept.
Three boys and a girl are playing in a small room. They have play props everywhere on the floor, and many plastic toy boxes are placed in a line (dividing the room into two sides). They had built what they called a bomb house with the toy boxes in the room:

B4 to everyone in the room:”Can I play with you?”
G1 to B4: ”No”
B1 to B4: “Yes, you will be the bad guy”
B4 to B1: “okay”

Also at the snake house, the one who says this is my game shared roles, “you are baby snake and I am daddy snake” they started crawling on their belly like snake do out of their house.

Outdoor
Outdoor at the playground, kids also engage in negotiation about the use of play props and how to move their play forward.

Six children seek for their spot to sit on a giant spider swing. Something happens there as boy1 says that G1 could stand on the other side of the swing and give speed as she is so good at it. Other children sit down, G1 and B1 are the only ones standing there trying to keep the swing in motion:

B1 to B2: “Can you help B2?” (to move their body back and forth in a way that they will get a faster speed)
B2 to B1: “Yes”

Children also negotiate and accept to do something first in order to be allowed to use a play prop or join a play.

B1: “Can I come on the swing”
B2 & B3: “First you need to push”
B2 to B1: “You have to push.”
B1 accepts that and pushes a little and then gets on the swing.

After a while, three kids got off from the swing and went into the toy house to fetch shovels, they went to the sandbox area and started digging. They were talking about making a nest for one of the boys:

B1: “Let’s dig a tunnel.” (they start to dig from the opposite sides to make a tunnel) B2 needs a bigger shovel to dig a tunnel.
B2: “B3 can we change shovels?”
B3: “yes”
B1: “B3 can you help B2?”
B1: “Can we dig deeper?”
B2 again: “Can I borrow this shovel?”
B1 to B3: “Now can B2 borrow the shovel?”
B3: “Yes” (and gives the shovel to him)

Observation also reveals how children makes rules with respect to the use of play props and expect others to respect such rules in order to be part of a play. Usually, the kid who initiates a play or game makes the rules and ask others to follow it and at other times, rules are made together.

Two boys after playing a tag for a while got tired and sit at a table on the playground to catch their breath. While sitting, they pick some rocks from the ground and use them as dice. They throw the dice on a table, say an imaginary number and then count. The observers were not clear about whose idea it was to improvise the rocks as dices, but they were playing nicely and taking turns to throw the “dice”. B2 joins and he wants to play the dice game with B1. From their conversation, it seems B1’s game idea was to use only one dice in playing the game but B2 also has some rocks with him as well.

B1 to B2: “This is my game, we can only have one rock”
B2 left the game

Another scenario about negotiating rules while using a play prop happens between two boys and a girl. In this scenario, the boy says he is following the rules but he just does not understand how to play the game:

G1: “B1 is not following the rules”

Observer: “What are the rules?”
G1: “I have tried to teach him how to do these things”
B2: “And B1 is not listening…”
B1: “I’m but I just don’t know how to…”

7.2 Problem Solving during Free Play

In accessing the skill of problem solving, writers pay attention to how kids are suggesting solutions, resolving conflicting issues, arguing with words, listening, self-control, responding, taking responsibility and ability to solve problems by self without involving teachers. Children sometimes argue about the use of play props or space during play and they try to find solutions to the problems. They also understand the need to apologise for doing wrong whenever it occurs whether consciously or unconsciously.

Indoor
Two kids are playing with plastic bricks in the small room.They made two balls with pipes on both ends to join them together to form something that looks like a weight. Boy and girl wanted to exercise with it and they start to argue about who goes first:

G1 suddenly: “Let's take turns, first me and then you.”

They both are ok with the suggestion. While the girl lifts the weight for few seconds, the boy says: “Now it’s my turn” and the girl gives the weight to him and the play continues.

In another play area, a boy and a girl (siblings) are arguing about the use of a drawing kit.

B4 to G1: “Can I try the drawing?”
G1 to B4: “No”
B4 to G1: “You are not sharing” (in a frustrated tone)
G1 to B4: “At home, you can try”

In the two play situations above, the kids demonstrated a considerable level of ability to manage their conflict before it degenerate and without involving an adult.

Also, some of the kids were quite sensitive to the context of the play and they try to offer a solution to a perceived conflicting issue especially when they sense that the other playmate is not handling an issue in the right way.
At the big room, kids are sitting in front of a computer with one of them controlling the mouse while others watch the game on the screen and sometimes make suggestions about what he could do.

B1 to B2: “Can you make that bigger?”

B2 to B1: “I don’t know how to make it bigger”
B1 to B2: “I can erase it” (grabs the computer mouse from B2)
B2: “Noooo…”
B2 to B1: “We can take turns…”

Outdoor
If a play cannot continue or the use of a play prop becomes impossible due to some kids involvement in such play, kids also take responsibility of the situation and try to excuse themselves from the play and look for something else to do. At the giant spider swing area, three kids are sitting on the swing, and two kids are standing on opposite sides on the swing to keep the swing in motion, another kid joins the three that are sitting, and the swing becomes heavy for them to push. The two kids who are pushing say to him:

B1 to B2: "We can't push you because this is too heavy.”
B2: “Okay, I will get off” (gets off the swing)

B2 jumps down from the swing goes to pick a shovel and starts digging. He shows a good sense of responsibility by not staying to disrupt other kids play or the use of their play props since they were there before him. However, kids also used few other problem-solving methods which will be enumerated under another heading.

7.3 Fairness during Free Play

In accessing the skills of fairness in kids, writers pay attention to making and following rules, including or excluding playmates, respecting others points of view, managing feelings, expressing feelings politely, sharing and turn taking. At play, it was noticed that children used kind words with one another, they understand the need to say thank you first for an offer from another playmate even if the offer is not going to be accepted. Also, they praise each other's achievements and give equal chances to playmates for the use of play props.

Indoor
Two girls are sitting at a table in the big room with one of them drawing and making a craft, the other girl gets interested and decides to make something out of paper. She asks the teacher for paper, but the first girl offers her papers from her unused pile:

G1 to G2: “You can use these papers also”
G2 to G1: “Thank you but I don't need that, I need a bigger paper”

In another play area, there are two kids, a boy and a girl at the computer playing a game. They talk to each other in a nice, soft voice and take turns while playing the game. As the

boy manages to complete a task during the computer game, the girl turns towards him with a smile on her face and says: “Well done” while holding nicely the boy’s shoulders.

Outdoor
There are three kids playing at the jungle gym doing different tricks and asking one of the observers to watch:

Observer: “Are you taking turns?”
G1: “Yes, first is me, then G2 and then B1…”

Some of the kids also demonstrate the ability to mentor younger children using appropriate words while also applauding their success at play and in the right use of play props:

G1 and B1 are doing stunts at the chin-up-bars. Two of the observed boys and a younger boy try to copy them but do not succeed. B3 asks the observer to lift him but the observer thinks the bar is so high and refuses to lift him. He continues to ask the same question until B1 says: “I can lift you”. G1 shows others how to climb the bar. She instructs others: “Can you do this?” When someone succeeds G1 says: “Good, good!” She continues: “Can you also put your legs down?” When the child manages to do that G1 repeats: “Good, good”.

B1: “Let's make a sand pizza. Let's make a sand pile.” (they start to scoop sand on a mushroom table in the sandbox)
B2: “I will help you” (two boys are helping to put sands on the mushroom table to make sand pizza)

Two girls and a boy are climbing a jungle gym - a kind of gymnastic play

B1 to G1: “It's my turn now”
G1 to B1: “okay, your turn”

During the observation, it was noticeable that the observed group of kids understands the need to be fair to others and give them an opportunity also at play, but they sometimes get carried away when they are having fun that they forget this. However, if the other playmates ask for a turn, some of them are usually quick to let them have a go as well.

7.4 Solving problems wrongly

In the process of the observation, it is noticeable that kids understand the need to play fairly, respect and give equal chances to other playmates but sometimes this is not the case. Some of them use aggressive behaviour or negative verbal utterances in dealing with conflicting situations. Some do not bother to solve the problem, and they just walk away from the play area and sit alone somewhere:

B1 brought his own personal toy with him, blue lizard. B2 notices that one of the young kids holds it and shouts to B1: "He has your lizard". B1 tries to get it from him but could not. All of sudden B3 stops his own game and tears the lizard from the younger boy and gives it to B1. B3 goes back to play and B1 puts the lizard on the floor and continues building something out of bricks.

Two kids are sitting in front of a computer in the big room and play a computer game. Few minutes later, B1 comes to see what game one of them was playing. He tells the player to let go of the mouse so that he can click something, but the player says: "No, I want to do it by myself". After asking and waiting few seconds without the player letting go, B1 taps rudely on the keyboard and leaves. The player seems angry and shouts: "You silly".

At the playground outside, two observed kids head to the jungle gym. There are two kids already there climbing and making stunts. A younger boy comes there and starts to climb as well. B1 shouts: "Get off!!" and he looks angry. Soon the same young boy tries to climb again, and B1 goes and hits him:

The observer: "Why did you hit him?"
B1: "Because he didn't let me go here!"

In a small room three boys are making bombs with flat plastic bricks. One of them threw the 'bombs' at the others, and the bricks went flying everywhere in the room. B1 throws another toy, and he gets a shove from B2. B1 gets upset and leaves the play room.

Two boys playing with rocks at the outdoor table:

B1 to B2: "You can only have one rock in my game…"
B2 does not say anything but throws his rocks at B1.

Even though the kindergarten has rules against all forms of verbal and non-verbal aggressive behaviours, it was evident from the observations and the play scenarios above that children still use such in problem-solving. Some kids are seen working away from conflict situations rather than solving them. This might be because they prefer to save their faces rather than confront the situation. On the other hand, some may see walking away as the right answer to not reacting in an aggressive way as well.

7.5 Teachers' role

Observations made both indoor and outdoor during free play period also points out the important roles of a teacher in the physical environment of the kindergarten. With regards to the use of the computer as a play prop in the environment, play domination was evident and

sometimes, kids express frustration and look upon the observers to intervene. Many times, children ask the person who is playing for a turn, but never gets a chance until the kid finishes his game and leaves the computer which sometimes takes about 20-30 minutes.

G1 to B1: “Can I try if you cannot do this, can I try?”
B1 to G1: “No”
G1 touches the mouse but B1 shoved her hand away.
G1 to B1: “Can I try this? Can I try the next level?”
B1: “Its G2's turn” (gives the mouse to G2)
G1: “Then can I try after that, can I try the next one?”
B1: “No”
G1: “Only her?”
B1: “Yes…you can try the last one”
G2: “Now G1” (G1 takes the mouse but B1 says it is G2’s turn and G2 takes the mouse again)
G1: “Can I try?” (again and again)
The observer: “G1, is it your turn now?”
G1: “Yes! but they are not letting me! B1 also did Monday and Tuesday'” (In a frustrated and angry voice)
The observer to B1: “It’s G1's turn now”
B1: “NO” (he finishes the game)

There are five participant children around the computer. Three of them are sitting and two of them are standing. A boy wants to play and constantly asks the current player when he can play. The player does not give the computer mouse and says something to him. The boy answers in a frustrated way “Fiiiine, then I’ll do two”. The player said “Okay”. Little while later, the boy asks the player again “Can I try this one?”, “I’ll do one”. Soon he says “aaahhh” in a tired, frustrated way because the player is not giving him a turn. Sometimes the boy looks at the observer after asking questions from the player (the expression on his face seems to say 'please do something).
There are two computers in the kindergarten but as at the time of the observation, one of them was not working properly, so all kids’ attention was on that one which was working. Everyone wants to play a game but unfortunately, only one person can control a mouse and each game lasts at least 15 minutes or more. This obviously makes sharing and turn taking difficult.

In the small room play area, kids are playing with plastic bricks and one of them pushes the other roughly because he throws bricks at him. The boy runs to the big room and sits on a chair behind the aquarium. Observer went and asks him: “Why aren’t you playing?” He an-

swers: “I hate when he pushes me…he hurt me..” Observer speaks with the boy for a while and then ask him about the games and toys he likes to play with other kids. The boy says: “I have already forgotten everything…

Children's views about play props and the kindergarten physical environment

At the tail end of the observations, during free play interaction with the kids, observers ask each kid separately questions about the play props he/she likes playing with other kids. All kids say they like Lego (construction blocks/bricks):

> “I like playing with Legos with other kids”
> “The computer… No, the Legos”
> “I like the big Lego because I can build house with them. It's even faster”
> “I like the Lego that which I can build rocket”
> “I like Ninjago (Lego Ninjago), I can play Ninjago with the other kids because there are many Ninjagos, red, green, blue”

In summary, the above figures show that kids are able to exercise acquired skills of negotiation, problem-solving and fairness more when playing with open-ended play props such as construction bricks, kindergarten chairs, craft papers and sandbox. However, even though these three social skills were also observed with play props described as close-ended, such as a computer, swing, and jungle gym, negotiation, problem solving and fairness were not sufficiently put to use. Findings also revealed that when children are playing with materials which could be adapted to play in various ways (open-ended props) writers observed less conflicting scenarios as against props with only one predetermined way of usage. Additionally, the outdoor figure above indicates less problem-solving compared to indoor diagram. Such indication may be due to the number of play props available outdoors which were a little more dynamic than the play props indoors. Hence, there were less conflicting issues that could bring problem-solving.

8 Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how early childhood physical environment supports children’s social skills amongst five to seven year olds children. The deeper objective for our study was to see what are the particular play props used while children negotiate, solve problems and play fairly and how such props support social interaction among children. For this study, the information was collected in a private, English-speaking kindergarten that follows neo-humanist educational model. Data was gathered through participant observation both

indoors as well as outdoors settings. After the ten participant observations, data was then analyzed qualitatively using interpretative content analysis method.

The findings show that play props have a significant effect in supporting children's social skills. Participant children were able to use their social skills sufficiently with most of the used play props but also, with some play props children were not able to use their social skills successfully. Therefore, it is significant to take into consideration the purpose of an exact play prop and the design of the kindergarten setting.

Based on our findings, there was no variety of play props used in the indoor settings. It was however interesting to notice that even though children did play with the same play props many times during our observations such play props mostly enabled children to use their negotiation, problem-solving and fairness skills. Our findings illustrate that children used more play props described as "between close and open equipment" when there occurred positive and constructive negotiation, problem-solving and fairness skills. According to Prescott (2008), close equipment in the kindergarten often enables children to use such toys in a restricted way whereas open equipment allows children to use their creativity, and it has no one correct way to use it. Because the computer and construction bricks were the most used play props in the indoor play settings, children spent most of their free play time amidst them. Therefore, we could observe both sufficient and insufficient negotiation, problem-solving and fairness skills while children were playing on the computer or with bricks.

The kindergarten's computer was an active meeting place for the children; it enabled children to be physically close to each other but restricted most of the children's full involvement to games as later explained. Nevertheless, children spontaneously gave own suggestions to the player as well as offered help when needed. Vilén et al. (2013, 528) mention that the computer often gathers children to work together and that way, group of children likely create social interaction around a computer- they explore things together, help each other and ask questions from others. Hence, it is certainly possible that children learn and use their social skills around technology, such as computers. Strandell, Haikkola and Kullman (2012, 90) however state that these days kindergartens are regarded as media-free places; if technology is used in kindergartens, used games or videos among children should have a pedagogical purpose not an entertainment purpose. Also, Kronqvist and Kumpulainen (2011) support above statement: computer games that have a pedagogical aim in them have been noticed to support children's problem-solving and cooperation skills.

It was interesting to see how children also utilized the "open equipment" of the indoor settings instead of playing just with the provided traditional toys. Based on our findings, kindergarten chairs and plastic toy boxes were the only open ended play prop furniture used indoors. As for the chairs and plastic toy boxes, children played more intensively with each

other, and clear negotiation skills were observed. Curtis and Carter (2003) support the fact that particularly open-ended materials and diverse furnishings have a linkage to children's social interaction; such materials encourage children to communicate with each other as well as enable them to develop different social skills. However, both play props were used only once during our indoor observations.

Based on our findings, almost every play prop was used outdoors during our observations. We could see that particularly on the swing, at chin-up bars and the jungle gym children used sufficient social skills, especially negotiation and fairness. It was surprising to notice that participant children used mostly built playground props rather than individual play props from the play storage provided by the kindergarten staff which consists of mainly shovels and buckets. The reason for this could be the insufficiency of diverse play props provided in the play prop storage or the age stage of the participant children. As Dunderfelt (2011) points out five to seven year olds children are at this particular age phase when they start to use their physical development potentials in plays; climbing, skipping, different tag games and adventures are such activities children aged five to seven enjoy participating in. Also, sufficient social skills were observed more in a snake park than in a spider park. The reason for this could lie in having variety of play props available in the snake park, both individual and group play props. However, children only played there once; thus, such findings may not be conclusive.

The findings further showed that even though the observed children have a commendable understanding of positive interaction with one another, they sometimes engaged in behaviour with insufficient social skills which, unfortunately, was also encouraged by few of the play props provided. Few of the behaviours with insufficient social skills that were recorded during the course of this study happened at the computer area. While it might be important to expose children to the use of modern technology from the point of view of the adults in the environment as mentioned before, we notice that, the computer in some ways hinder social interaction among the children. The scenario at the computer station is usually such that one child is playing the game (controlling the mouse) and others are bystanders. There was also a lot of game/play domination as the person who first got to the computer was usually the one who played there most of the time. This kind of behaviour often lead to the consequence that others had little or no chance to play. Thus, with this kind of attitude, children tried to finish their lunch or snack very fast in order to be the first ones at the computer station since they knew that they might not get a turn if someone is already there. Such situations may not be in line with the National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland as it (2004) states that the job of a well- designed ECEC environment is to promote activities in small groups where everyone has an opportunity to take part in discussion and interactions.

Additionally, we believe that the computer also created an artificial wall between the player and the bystanders. The player sat with his back to the other children, thus he/she could only hear what they are saying but cannot read the expressions on their faces. Many times, someone was asking for a turn to play a game and even begging, but the player either decides to listen or not to without seeing the expression of frustration on the other children's faces. To encourage collaboration, Curtis and Carter (2003, 45) posit that "including equipment and materials that require or suggest use by more than one person encourages collaboration and connection among children". Furthermore, playing game on a computer means sitting still for at least 15 minutes that we think is questionable in an early childhood setting. Frost (2010) also argues that children spend long hours among electronic play when outdoor play with peers is left behind these days. He further posits that children's play includes solitary and virtual play, video games, and all kinds of electronic media at home which do not necessary support children's socialization. Thus, we argue that such electronic media could be avoided in an early childhood environment because the early childhood environment has a significant role to play in the development of children's social skills since most of them spend the better part of their day in it. In some cases, it is the only environment where many kids have an opportunity to interact with other kids and learn rules of pro-social behaviour such as negotiation, problem-solving and fairness. Bruce (2011,167) also argues that "if a group of children are gathered together in large groups for a large part of their day, the 'bystander effect' is encouraged and moral behaviour is discouraged. Children in a smaller, intimate, quality early years setting are more likely to respond to situations as individuals and to learn to emphasize and show care".

Another insufficient social skill behaviour that was revealed in the findings were hitting and using unacceptable verbal utterances in problem solving. Even though kids are only allowed to bring their own toys to kindergarten on Fridays, findings showed that some of the children brought toys on days other than Fridays. According to the findings, this often creates unnecessary distraction as most of the kids want to try out the toys, which usually result in conflicts and unacceptable behaviours.

Subsequently, at the outdoor playground, we found out that the number of play props available to children at the spider park is insufficient. Also, most of them such as a slide, swing, and jungle gym are closed-ended props which could only be used in a particular pre-defined way. Thus, kids' social skills of negotiation and fairness are put to test in such situations because they are sometimes fighting for a turn to use a particular prop which the current user might have difficulty to let go. May (2011) states that when kids have to wait for long periods of time with nothing to do or areas of the setting that have insufficient equipment are often trigger points for frustration. Such occasions were evident as we noticed that, kids got bored

of playing with the same set of props when they started to run around, hit one another, scatter or throw toys at one another or play fighting games. To them, they had found a solution to boredom by engaging in a play that might end up with casualties.

Although the primary focus of this study was on play props and the physical setting, the findings also revealed how important the role of a teacher is in the physical environment in supporting the development of acceptable social skills. There were occasions during participant observations when an adult intervened in the free play and made sure that children act in a fair way. Adult's interventions were usually the crucial turning points for children because participant children often changed their behaviour toward positive manners. Simply guiding children to do what they are supposed to do were often enough for children to practice their social skills. Kauppila (2011) emphasizes that adults play a significant role in promoting children's social skills – adults are the ones who can give verbal feedback for children whether they have acted in the right or wrong way. As much as researchers and recent studies emphasize the critical role of free play in cognitive, social and emotional development of children, findings showed that the intervention of teachers during such time should not be underestimated. Also, on few occasions during play, some of the kids looked up to the observers to intervene in perceived unfair play situations. Bruce (2011) believes that an adult is a child's helper, through conversation and provision of appropriate materials and the negotiator in disagreements. Teachers could increase their proximity with kids during free play in order to observe how play is progressing, make suggestions to expand play scenarios and also to ensure that kids treat themselves fairly regardless of their ages.

8.1 Ethics

Ethical consideration is an essential matter to take into account when it comes to good scientific practice. Silverman (2005, 257) points out that "studying people's behavior or asking them questions, not only the values of the researcher but also the researcher's responsibilities to those studied have to be faced." Padgett (2008) explains that ethical issues in qualitative research should be encountered carefully. To protect research participants rights during a research, the researcher must consider some key points of ethics in order to follow ethical guidelines of qualitative research in a right way. Ethical key issues in scientific practice, such as the role of the investigator, informed consent, confidentiality and also risk assessment are necessary matters to be discussed and gone through. The purpose of the previous main components is, for example, to secure research participant's anonymity, the right to quit participating in a research and a right to know about possible emotional harms research can cause to participants.

Concerning this study, kindergarten manager and teacher's consent was first obtained after explaining the main point of the study to them. Then children's parents were given an informed consent letter which explained the meaning of the study process and potential participants' role in the study. Moreover, ethical matters were informed to the parents, including protection of children's anonymity and identity as well as children's rights to withdraw from the study at any point in the process of the observation.

As this study's target research group is five to seven years old children, such minority group's involvement in research requires particular ethical considerations to take into account as well. If a research participant is under 12 years old, both the child's and parents' permission for participating in scientific practice is needed. Padgett (2008, 65) mentions "…children under age 12 may give verbal assent…" but yet, parents' permission should not be forgotten. However, it can be challenging to explain to young children about research in such ways that they will understand and be aware of its purposes and benefits. It also depends on the research problem and methods how well research cooperation with minors can be created in an ethical way (Grönfors 1985 cited in Vilkka 2006). Denscombe (2003, 203) argues that a researcher's role can be openly identified, just partly secret or entirely secret among those in a research setting. Which one of those three options will a researcher select depends on whether a researcher choose to focus on "participation as observer-", "participation in the normal setting-" or "total participation-" way of implementing the scientific practice. Since we needed to ensure that children give their verbal consent to the study process, we chose participation as observer. The kindergarten staff explained to the children during morning circle that we will be at the kindergarten for a period of time to play with them and watch how they play. One of the teachers of the kindergarten asked children's an approval for our research, and they all gave a positive answer. This was done in our presence.

Another ethical matter was that the process of data collection occurred as at the time when one of the observers was on her practical training in the kindergarten. To guide against the issue of subjectivity and using precedents to judge children's behaviour, we agreed that the second observer also visits the kindergarten few times before the beginning of the observation. Findings and its analysis were strictly based on texts in the field notes which was accurately compared and discussed after each party read and re-read before analysis. Further analysis and discussion were also based on observed phenomena that are obvious to both observers.

In the analysis of our findings, we also recognized the issue of confidentiality and anonymity as promised in the informed consent. No names were used in the analysis and precaution was also taken into account to ensure that no information is traced back to any of the kids. Conclusively, the thesis followed Laurea University of Applies Sciences thesis writing model and

ethics. It acknowledged all intellectual properties used in the course of the study and full credit were given for all those whose works were used as references.

8.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness strives for answering to a question: "how good a qualitative study is" (Bryman, 2011, 34). The purpose of trustworthiness is to ensure that either quantitative research results or qualitative research findings are credible and honest. In order to accurately argue research finding's quality, one must take into account validity, reliability and objectivity which are the key instruments of trustworthiness. (Robson 2011) Matters, such as responsibility of the researcher in a study, generalizability, accuracy and dependability of a qualitative research findings are essential factors when evaluating research's trustworthiness. Therefore, the goal for a researcher is to reflect pure truth of participants' answers or behaviours, instead of making vague interpretations or descriptions of participants actions. An aspiration is also to offer convincing findings that are correctly connected to research data and let alone achieve such findings that can be repeated. (Padgett 2008)

Because participant observation as a method did not enable us to write field notes consistently in the kindergarten settings, one could criticize the credibility of such data gatherings. On the other hand, missing fieldnotes were written down right after each observation was completed and this way we could avoid own interpretations of observations. As for a description of participants, we did make sure that anonymity and ethical aspects were taken into account.

Denscombe (2003, 209, 301) argues that participant observation method enables the researcher to gain valid data but restrict from obtaining reliable information. As participant observation usually happens in a natural environment where a participant observer is in the middle of an action, it makes possible for a researcher to "reflect reality and cover the crucial matters." and, therefore, validity can be better justified by using such method as participant observation. On the other hand, a participant observer's role in an observation setting challenges a possibility to obtain reliable data; as participant observation is described as "inherently subjective exercise"; thus, it can be challenging to achieve an impartial observation data (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey 2005, 15).

Objectivity is also one of the components of trustworthiness; it strives for obtaining data that is unbiased from "personal values and theoretical inclinations" (Bryman 2011). Even though the other one of us was doing her internship in the kindergarten at the same time when we had our observations, thoughts about how it will affect to the data objectivity made us still

carry out the observations impartially. While analyzing data, we could justify the fact that we had observed in an objective way as our observation data were mainly convergent.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

It could be deduces from the foregoing that the physical environment of an early childhood setting is as important as the children growing in it. Therefore, we recommend that the practitioners working in such setting could do a periodical observation on the play props they provide and the impact of such on the kids' holistic development. Concentration needs to be shifted from only cognitive development to social and emotional development as well because they are as critical to children's future as the former.

As our study focuses on the linkage between kindergarten physical environment and social skills, Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Scwarz and Guillou (2002) point out as follows: "One way to arrange the physical environment to promote social interaction is to use specific toys." They talk about the importance of acknowledging the facts that what purpose the toys represent and they divide toys into social and isolate categories; social toys support social interaction among children and isolate toys create more individual play. A similar phenomenon of social skills and physical environment has also been examined in Ivory and McCollum's study "Effects of Social and Isolate Toys on Social Play in an Inclusive Setting" (1999). They support the fact that social toys increased children's social interaction more than isolate toys. According to their study, they point out that play materials can be a useful tool for supporting children's social skills. McConnell (2002, cited in Hollingsworth 2005) talks about the different ways to rearrange the kindergarten's physical environment in order to obtain more social interaction among children. There are opportunities to choose toys that support social communication, to create play themes that are familiar to children and let alone, to see what are the play props children enjoy playing with. As our findings indicate, children were not playing much with open-ended play props and as for other researches, there is a clear linkage between particular play props and children's increased social interaction.

However, the values of the kindergarten also have an influence on kindergarten's structure, activities and settings. Kokljuschkin (2001) reminds that kindergarten's values often guide possible changes and choices that will happen in early childhood setting. Therefore, values of the neo-humanist education could be taken into consideration when restructuring the kindergarten's physical environment.

Since the main purpose of this study was to examine the physical environment and its possibilities to support children's social skills, therefore, the focus is on an early childhood education physical setting. During observations we notice that rearranging the kindergarten's setting could promote children social interaction more effectively. Bussey (2000 cited in Rama

Ac 2000) states that in order to practice social skills and develop empathy, children should be offered stories and drama plays to participate in. Also, Kauppila (2011) highlights the fact that drama is a great way to practice social skills. Play props such as dress-up clothes, puppets as well as different housekeeping props could further support children's social skills practice at Sunrise kindergarten. Children five years and up are at a developmental stage when games with rules start to inspire them. Therefore, providing card games as well as board games which will require two or more players is a potential way for children to practice social skills (such as negotiation, turn taking and problem solving) and actively participate in activities and plays.

We also recommend that the practitioners widen the physical environment to incorporate more play areas that could support children social development. For instance, the two corners presently occupied by the computers could be converted to role play/dress up and book corners. Curtis & Carter (2003) support that children also learn cooperative skills as they negotiate complex play scripts and try out roles and differing points of view. In the same vein, May (2011) says children often use positive social skills when they communicate ideas for role play. She also mentiones that children often get ideas for play scenes from a book or film they or adults have seen. Also, a well-defined book area with books within the reach of children and a comfortable couch is another area within the physical environment where children can practice the skill of negotiation and problem-solving. Children can sit together and negotiate about what books to read by (scanning through pictures). In the end, when they come to agreement about such book, (either to read each other's favorite one after the other or to jointly agree on one) they would have succeeded in solving a problem and moving their play forward. This area could also foster social relationship among children as May (2011, 79) submits that "socially, the book area is a wonderful way to enhance friendship and shared experiences."

Another area that we think could be of significance in supporting the development of social skills is a quiet area away from the noisy large play areas. On one of the observation days, an observer went into the staff room to quickly jot down something she had observed, and inside she found two kids sitting under teachers' desk in a corner and playing guitar. When asked why they are sitting there, they said the noise in the other rooms is too much, they needed a quiet space to listen to one of them playing the guitar. Curtis and Carter (2003) opines that children need get-away places for small groups to explore their relationships and ideas without unnecessary interruption. They further advocate that protected areas away from the larger classroom give children opportunities to have focused discussions and work cooperatively with one another. "Studio spaces and quiet coves and corners can be created with hanging fabric or canopies" (Curtis & Carter 2003, 58).

Subsequently, as it was revealed in the conversations the observers had with the children that they prefer the large play room because of the play props, we would recommend that few of the shelves in the room (for instance, the one close to the morning circle area) and the computers could be removed to expand the space. The space can then be used creatively to set up, role play area, book area, construction area, creative/ drawing area and board game area. Apart from widening the variety of play that will now be available to children, this will also reduce the empty space in the middle of the room that encourage running around and fighting games. In contrast, we suggest that some of the toys in the smaller play room be moved to the big room so that it could double as a quiet area and a nap room (its original use). At one end of the room could be a drape hanging from the ceiling to the ground to define the room with colorful soft pillows on the floor. This quiet area will indicate to children that they can come there whenever they need a getaway from the busy large room. With these, the practitioners would have succeeded not only in creating "places for children" but allowing children the opportunity to create "children's places" for themselves as well (Rasmussen 2004, 155).

Although this study was a small-scale and research- based project, this study could be applied towards an action-based project. Further study projects could involve more children to participate in designing the kindergarten's physical environment; Kokljuschkin (2001) points out the fact that children's opinions about the kindergarten settings should be seriously taken into consideration. He emphasizes that children are the experts of the physical early childhood environments because they are the ones who actively play and act in the settings. Also, Driskell (2002, cited in Mukherji & Albon 2010, 53) supports children's potential to be part of early childhood education researches: "…projects about the physical environment are often highly motivating for children." A current survey of Finnish parents' opinions about early childhood education in Finland also indicated the fact that parents hoped for more children's participation in different matters in the kindergarten (Ministry of Education and Culture 2014). A possible study could additionally examine the changes that happen in children's social interactions after restructuring a kindergarten's physical setting.

Lastly, the process of this thesis has taught us various things; we are now acquainted with research process both at the practical and theoretical level. In-depth exploration of kindergartens' physical environments and children's social development has enriched our know-how in the area of early childhood education. The process of thesis practice has also taught us to value the opportunities to enhance children's development in many ways in the kindergarten settings.

References

Alanen, L. & Karila, K. (eds.) 2009. Lapsuus, lapsuuden instituutiot ja lasten toiminta. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Bodrova, E. & Leong, J. 2003. Learning and Development of Preschool Children from the Vygotskian Perspective. Vygotsky Educational Theory in Cultural Context (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Broadhead, P., Johnston, J., Tobbell, C. & Woolley, R. 2010. Supporting Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage: Personal, Social and Emotional Development. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Bruce, M. 2010. OWP/P Architects and VS Furniture. The Third Teacher- 79 Ways you can use Design to Transform Teaching and Learning. New York: Abrams.

Bruce, T. 2011. Early Childhood Education. 4th edition. London: Hodder Education.

Bruce, T., Meggitt, C. & Grenier, J. 2010. Child Care and Education. 5th edition. London: Hodder Education.

Bryman, A. 2008. Social Research Methods. 3rd edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Csoti, M. 2001. Social Awareness Skills for Children. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Curtis, D. & Carter, M. 2003. Design for Living and Learning, Transforming Early Childhood Environments. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

Denscombe, M. 2003. The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects. 2nd edition. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Devapriya, A. 2011. Educating Balance in an Accelerating World. Newsletter of Neohumanist Schools and Institutes affiliated with Ananda Marga Gurukula, (33), 20.

Dowling, M. 2010. Young Children's Personal, Social & Emotional Development. 3rd edition. London: Sage.

Dunderfelt, T. 2011. Elämänkaaripsykologia. Helsinki: Wsoypro Oy.

Fawsett, M. 2009. Learning Through Child Observation. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Fox, L., Dunlap, G., Hemmeter, M., Joseph, G. & Strain, P. 2003. The Teaching Pyramid; A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children. Accessed 26 March 2014.
http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/yc_article_7_2003.pdf

Fraser, S. 2012. Authentic Childhood. Nelson Education. Ontario

Frost, L. 2010. A History of Children's Play and Play Environment: Towards a contemporary Child Saving Movement. New York: Routledge.

Gifford, R. 2002. Environmental Psychology, Principles and Practice. 3rd edition. Canada: Optimal Books.

Grigsby, R., K. (ed.) 2010. Participant observation studies: the handbook of social work research methods. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Haenen, J., Schrijnemakers, H., & Stufkens, J. 2011. Sociocultural Theory and the Practice of Teaching Historical Concepts. Vygotsky Educational Theory in Cultural Context (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harris, J., Beneke, S. & Steinheimer, K. 2007. Windows on learning: Documenting Young Children's Work. University of Michigan:Teachers College Press.

Hasson, G. 2012. Brilliant Emotional Intelligence. London: Pearson.

Hobart, C. & Frankel J. 2009. A Practical Guide to Child Observation and Assessment. 4th edition. United Kingdom: Nelson Thornes.

Hollingsworth, H. 2005. Interventions to Promote Peer Social Interactions in Preschool Settings. Journal of Young Exceptional Children, 2 (9). Abstract from Sage Journals. Accessed 12 June 2014. http://yec.sagepub.com.nelli.laurea.fi/content/9/1/2.full.pdf+html

Hughes, F. P. 2010. Children, Play, and Development. 4th edition. USA: Sage.

Ivars, M. (ed.) 2001. Lapsuuden rakennettu ympäristö 2001. Finnreklama Oy.

Ivory, J. & McCollum, J. 1999. Effects of Social and Isolate Toys on Social Play in an Inclusive Setting. Journal of Special Education, 238 (32). Abstract from Sage Journals. Accessed 14 June 2014. http://sed.sagepub.com.nelli.laurea.fi/content/32/4/238.full.pdf+html

Johnson, D. & Johnson, F. 2014. Joining together, group theory and group skills. 11th edition. Essex: Pearson.

Kauppila, R. 2011. Vuorovaikutustaidot-ja sosiaaliset taidot, Vuorovaikutusopas opettajille ja opiskelijoille. Jyväskylä: Bookwell Oy.

Keltikangas-Järvinen, L. 2010. Sosiaalisuus ja sosiaaliset taidot. Helsinki: Werner Söderström.

Kokljuschkin, M. 2001. Unelmien päiväkoti, kohti parempaa oppimisympäristöä. Helsinki: Tammi.

Korpelainen, H., Kaukonen, H. & Räsänen, J. 2004. Arkkitehtuurin ABC, Löytöretki rakennettuun ympäristöön. Helsinki: SAFA Suomen Arkkitehtiliitto.

Kostelnik, M., Gregory, K., Soderman, A. & Whiren, A. 2011. Guiding Children's Social Development and Learning. 7th edition. USA: Cengage Learning.

Kronqvist, E-L. & Kumpulainen, K. 2011. Lapsuuden oppimisympäristöt, Eheä polku varhaiskasvatuksesta kouluun. Helsinki: Wsoy.

Kronqvist, E-L. & Pulkkinen M-L. 2007. Kehityspsykologia, Matkalla muutokseen. Helsinki: Wsoy Oppimateriaalit.

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K., Guest, R. & Namey, E. 2005. Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide. Accessed 10 April 2014. http://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20-%20A%20Data%20Collector's%20Field%20Guide.pdf

Mason, J. 2002. Qualitative Researching. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

May, P. 2011. Child Development in Practice: Responsive teaching and learning from birth to Five. London: Routledge.

Ministry of Education and Culture. 2014. Vaikuta varhaiskasvatukseen.Vanhempien kuuleminen varhaiskasvatuksen lainsäädäntöprosessissa. Accessed 4 April 2014. http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Koulutus/koulutuspolitiikka/vireilla_koulutus/varhaiskasvatus/liitteet/Vaikuta_varhaiskasvatukseen.pdf

Mukherji, P & Albon, D. 2010. Research methods in Early childhood, an introductory guide. London: Sage.

Naughton, L., M. & Hughes, P. (2010). Doing Action Research in Early Childhood Studies: A step by step guide. England: Open University Press.

Nivedita, A. 2000. Morality-the Heart of Education. In Rama Ac., A. (ed.) Neo-Humanist Education: Documentation on Neo-Humanist Education, 67.

Nurmi, J-E., Ahonen, T., Lyytinen, H., Lyytinen, P., Pulkkinen, L. & Ruoppila, I. 2006. Ihmisen psykologinen kehitys. Porvoo: Wsoy.

Nurmiranta, H., Leppämäki, P. & Horppu, S. 2009. Kehityspsykologiaa lapsuudesta vanhuuteen. Helsinki: Kirjapaja.

Online webpage of Sunrise Finland- Neo-Humanist Education. 2003. Accessed 1 April 2014. http://www.sunrisefinland.org/

Padgett, D. 2008. Qualitative methods in social work research. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Patton, M. 2002. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. 3rd edition. London: Sage.

Pound, L. 2006. How children learn: From Montessori to Vygotsky- educational theories and approaches made easy. London: Practical Pre-school Books.

Prescott, E. 2008. The physical environment, A powerful regulator of experience. Exchange, March/April, 34. Article from the ChildCareExchange online. Accessed 13 May 2014. http://childcareexchange.com/library/5018034.pdf

Publications of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. 2003. The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care. Accessed 30 March 2014. http://www.thl.fi/thl-client/pdfs/267671cb-0ec0-4039-b97b-7ac6ce6b9c10

Rama Ac, A. (ed.) 2000. Documentation on Neo-Humanist Education Propounded by Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar. India: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications.

Rasmussen, K. 2004. Places for Children - Children's places. Journal of Childhood, 11 (2), 155-173. Abstract from Sage Journals. Accessed 15 June 2014. http://chd.sagepub.com.nelli.laurea.fi/content/11/2/155.full.pdf+html

Read, M, A., Sugawara, A, I., and Brandt, J, A. (1999) Impact of Space and Colour in the Physical Environment on Preschool Children's Cooperative Behaviour. Journal of Environment and Behaviour, 31 (3), 413-428. Sage.

Rimm-Kaufman, E., La Paro, M., Downer, T. & Pianta, C. 2005. The contribution of classroom setting and quality of instruction to children's behavior in kindergarten classrooms. Journal of Elementary School,105 (4), 377–394.The University of Chicago Press. Accessed 2 April 2014. http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086/429948?uid=3737976&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21103859254547

Robson, C. 2011. Real World Research. 3rd edition. United Kingdom: Wiley.

Roos 2013. Kindergarten Manager. Garden City Playschool. Conversation with the kindergarten teacher. 10 October 2013. Personal communication

Rubin, K., Bukowski, W. & Laursen, B. (eds.) 2011. Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups. London: The Guildford Press.

Shaw, A. 2013. Beyond "to Share or Not to Share": The Impartiality Account of Fairness. Journal of Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22 (413). Abstract from Sage Journals. Accessed 5 June 2014.
http://cdp.sagepub.com.nelli.laurea.fi/content/22/5/413.full.pdf+html

Sheridan, M. 2009. From birth to five years. Children's Developmental Progress. 3rd edition. London: Routledge.

Silverman, D. 2005. Doing Qualitative Research. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Strandell, H., Haikkola. L. & Kullman K. (eds.) 2012. Lapsuuden muuttuvat tilat. Tampere: Bookwell Oy.

Tapaninen, A., Kauppinen, T., Kivinen, K., Kotilainen, H., Kurenniemi, M. & Pajukoski, M. 2002. Ympäristö ja Hyvinvointi. Porvoo: WSOY.

Taylor, A., Peterson, C., McMurray-Scwarz, P & Guillou, T. 2002. Social Skills Interventions: not just for children with special needs. Journal of Young Exceptional Children, 19 (5). Abstract from Sage Journals. Accessed 12 June 2014.
http://yec.sagepub.com.nelli.laurea.fi/content/5/4/19.full.pdf+html

Thornton, L. & Brunton, P. 2010. Bringing the Reggio Approach to your Early Years Practice. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Vilén, M., Vihunen, R., Vartiainen, J., Sivén, T., Neuvonen, S. & Kurvinen, A. 2013. Lapsuus erityinen elämänvaihe. Helsinki: Sanoma Pro Oy.

Vilkka, H. 2006. Tutki ja havannoi. Helsinki: Tammi.

Figures

Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent letter

PARENTAL CONSENT FOR A CHILD'S
PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH THESIS

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are final year students of Social Services degree at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Otaniemi. We are requesting your child's participation in a research thesis entitled "A study of Sunrise Kindergarten's physical environment as a third teacher in promoting social skills".

The purpose of this research is to study how the physical environment, setting and the play props provided in a play school support the development of kids' social skills. We will be using the following research procedures: observing children during structured activity period and during their free play time. Our observation is mostly directed at the language the kids are using during play, the play props they are playing with and if the play props encourage cooperative play, taking turns or sharing.

We will be using a participant observation method which means apart from observing the children, we will also take children's opinions into consideration; asking them few questions about the playschool environment such as,

What part of the kindergarten do you like the most?
What toys/games do you enjoy playing with and why?
Are there games with rules?
What aspect of the kindergarten would you like to be changed and why?

This academic study is totally anonymous, thus, children names or any form of identity are not required. Also, we are not taking pictures nor recording their opinions. We are documenting our observations and children's opinions on paper which we are only using for the purpose of this study.

We do not foresee that your child should experience any risks as a result of his/her participation in this project.

Appendix 1

Your child will not receive any direct, personal benefit as a result of his/her participation in this project; however, his/her participation will allow us to know how much the physical environment of Sunrise playschool supports children social skills and if there is need to make recommendation for further improvements.

You and your child have several choices regarding non-participation in this study:

You or your child may decide not to participate at all;
Your child may participate but may decide not to answer some of the questions;
You or your child may decide to end his/her participation even after they have begun.

Any of these choices is an option and your child will not suffer any penalty; nor will it negatively affect your child in any way.

The data collected from this study will be used for an educational purpose. Any questions about this study or any related problems may be directed to the students: Olabode Fashina - olabode.fashina@student.laurea.fi and Elisa Korkeakoski - elisa.korkeakoski@student.laurea.fi

Please sign below whether or not you will allow your child's participation in this project by filling in the appropriate statement and returning to your child's teacher.

I do grant permission for my child, _____ to participate in this study.

I do not grant permission for my child,_____ to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Parent/Guardian signature Date

CATEGORY **Social skills**	Includes	A researcher should note	Physical environment: (Setting and play props)
The key concepts: **Negotiation**	-making decisions together -exchanging ideas -asking and giving permission to join play -compromising willingly, expressing interest and explaining why to others	• Non-verbal communication: negative and positive facial expressions, eye-contact • Verbal communication; how views and opinions are shared, accepted or rejected • Letting go or walking away from play, leadership in play or co-players • Negotiating & agreeing on roles in play	
Problem-solving	-suggesting solutions -asking questions/permission, -resolving conflicting issues, -calling teacher, -argue with words than "blow", -listening	• Self-control; waiting, initiating, responding, taking responsibility • Way of solving problems verbally, physically • Ability to solve a problem by self or involving teacher, aggressive behaviour, Physical behavior and gestures: saying sorry, hugging	
Fairness	-making and following rules, -including or excluding playmates, -	• Way of behaving: respecting others' points of view, managing feelings • Politeness: using appropriate words to express feelings • sharing • turn-taking	