

CHILDREN`S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL AND AT THE END OF THIRD GRADE

Airi Kukk, Leida Talts, Helle Sikka,
Tallinn University, Estonia
E-mail: leida.talts@tlu.ee

Abstract

The present paper¹ deals with social skills of Estonian preschool and primary school children. The aim is to analyze how teachers evaluate students` social development and what substantial differences occur in the level of social skills at preschool and at the end of third grade. In order to develop children`s perception of themselves as citizens, it is important to emphasize those goals of the curriculum, which promote the main qualities of citizenship: identify, belonging and participation.

Assessment of social skills based on the questionnaire „Transition from Preschool to School”. The study was carried out in four stages- the same children were evaluated by their teachers at the end of pre-school and at the end of first-, second and third grade. At each stage of the study teachers were asked to evaluate children`s individual achievements in nine target areas relying on curriculum aims: learning skills; social skills; language; mathematics; ethics; health; physical development; art and culture. The nine areas were rated on a scale from one to five. The results showed a very high reliability for the teacher rating ($\text{Alpha}=.95$).

The mean assessments of teachers demonstrate that social skills as well as appreciating different attitudes and altruism and accepting diversity have received weaker assessments from the teachers than other objectives.

Key words: social skills, curriculum, transition, sustainability.

Introduction

The importance and sustainable development of social skills in any society reflects not only the developmental level of children in that domain, but the attitude of the whole society towards social values. There is a risk that a society based on constant rivalry and worship of success has its influence on teachers, parents and children already in the starting position of educational life, causing anxiety about possible failures and leaving such social values like cooperation, tolerance, common aims, etc in the background. The essence is that already in pre-school preparation groups the importance of academic achievements over basic social skills is stressed in Estonian education. The studies conducted in Estonia in recent years (Talts, 2003; Talts, 2008; Talts&Mägi, 2005; Sikka&Vikat, 2005) show that children`s subject related achievement before commencing school as well as in the first three years at school are high. Also the results of standard-determining tests carried out in different subjects all over the country are good; these are evenly good in different regions in Estonia. Good academic skills should not be an aim in itself, but as L. Vögotski (1978) has stressed in his zone of proximal development (ZPD), children`s cognitive development occurs essentially as a result of

¹ This article was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation, grant No. 6073

interacting with more knowledgeable and competent others, who are willing to provide guidance and support in problem solving situation and will sensitively adjust their help in such a way that the child is challenged to participate in activities just beyond his or her current level of understanding. Further in development insufficient social skills have negative influence also on learning skills and may cause dropping out of school.

The main aim of the present article is to explain how sustainable the development of social skills is from pre-school preparation groups until the end of the third grade; which skills need more attention and further development already before commencing school; and how does the development of social skills differ in boys and girls. Whereas the study is longitudinal, it is possible to use the data on the same child population within four years, i.e. since pre-school to the end of the third grade.

How to define social skills?

Social skills cannot be simply and accurately defined, because quite similar terms such as social competence and interpersonal skills are used in connection with this notion (Saat, 2005). Consequently the notion is based on the definition by S.Sheridani&D.Walkeri (1999) according to which social skills can be seen as an acquired behaviour aimed at a certain objective, and this behavior enables people to effectively communicate and function in different social environments. Both the *Framework Curriculum of Pre-School Education* and the *National Curriculum of General Education Schools* regards the taxonomy of positive behavior, similar to the taxonomy framed up by P.Caldarella and K.Merelli (1997), as one of the most important educational aims. The named taxonomy of positive behavior is divided into five categories, each of which is characterized by certain social skills. 1) Peer relations (e.g. the skill of offering help, apologizing, participation in joint activities, participation in communication, making friends, etc.); 2) Self-management (e.g. the skill of controlling one`s behavior in case of such strong emotion like anger; enduring criticism; following rules and restrictions; etc.); 3) Academic skills (e.g. the skill of asking questions, independence in completing assignments, etc.); 4) Compliance (e.g. following rules, clearing away one`s tools and toys, etc.); 5) Assertion skills (e.g. making friends, disputing unfair rules and actions, responding to injustice, etc.).

Studies from the last decade (Katz, 1995; Claxton & Carr, 2004; EAUDE, 2006) stress the need to handle the development of social skills in the context of the learning process as a whole. Cognitive skills include sensitivity to social problems- role taking, anticipating the consequences of personal and social acts, generation of alternative solutions, development of means-end thinking and social – causal reasoning. G. Spivak`s and M. Shure`s (1982) research demonstrated that some of these skills emerge in children 8 to 10 years of age.

Interactions between children and teachers are a primary mechanism through which classroom experiences affect development. Sensitive teacher-child interactions form the basis for the development of supportive relationships in the classroom (Tudge, 1990; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). Such approach generally relies also on the socio-cultural development theory by L. Vygotski (1981), which considers that joint activities of adults and children are important for the social and mental development of children. In the process of interaction the teacher and child may considerably influence the quality of emotional relationship and teacher`s emotional responses to children`s individual ways of communication.

Methodology of Research

Assessment of social skills and development in preschool and at the end of the first grade is based on the questionnaire „Transition from Preschool to School”. In spring 2003 teachers of preparatory groups from the kindergartens in Tallinn and the regions around Tallinn assessed the achievements of children prior their commencing school relying on curriculum aims. In spring, from 2004 to 2007 teachers were asked to assess the achievements of the same children at the end of their first, second and third school year. At each stage of the study teachers were asked to evaluate children`s individual achievements in nine target areas: learning skills; social skills; language and communication; mathematics; ethics and world view; science and the environment; health; physical and motor development and art and culture.

The nine areas were rated on a scale from one to five (1=very low level; 3=medium level; 5=excellent level) for each item.

Processing the data of the present study, the computer statistical program SPSS was used. Analysing the data statistically significant differences in averages were found by t-test. The reliability for rating the children's learning was calculated by an Alpha-coefficient. The results showed a very high reliability for the teachers' rating (Alpha=.95). All differences between groups are significant $p < 0.05$.

It is a longitudinal study, where the achievement of the most important curriculum aims of the same children was assessed in the course of four years. The present study focuses only on the social skills of the children before commencing school and at the end of the first and the third grade.

Teachers rated 21 statement showing social development. The statements have been considered important also in the objectives of the curriculum for compulsory schools. The social skills in the questionnaire can be divided into five different categories: peer relations, self-management, academic skills, compliance and assertion skills.

Results of Research

As follows, the achieved social skills will be studied focusing at the time before commencing school and the end of the first and third grade. First, the study carried out in the older groups of kindergarten is analyzed proceeding from the question: *how do kindergarten teachers evaluate the social skills of children commencing school, and if and to what extent do the achievements in the named target areas differ in girls and boys?* Next, the focus is on the level of social skills acquired by the end of the first and the third grade, and finally the results of the children on the three stages are compared. The aim of the comparison of the different age groups is to find an answer to the question: *how sustainable is the development of social skills and which skills need greater attention already prior to commencing school?*

General evaluation on the level of children's social skills. Evaluating the level of children's social skills on a five-point scale, the general evaluation from both kindergarten and the primary school teachers is prevalingly positive. The figure below (see Figure 1) illustrates the acquired social skills in the three stages analyzed in the study. Commencing the first grade a child needs to adjust to entirely different conditions, prescribed by the school and the organization of schooling and education at school. At the end of the third grade which in Estonia equals to the end of the first stage of basic school, the progress and coping of children in the given stage of study is summed up.

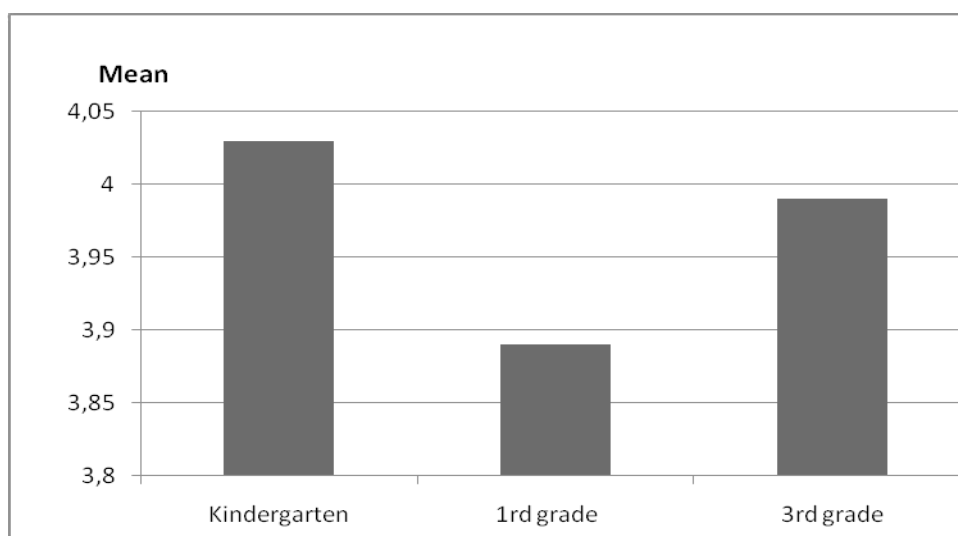


Figure 1. Teachers' evaluations on the level of children's social skills before commencing school and at the end of the first and the third grade.

Analyzing the results presented on Figure 1 it appears that according to the evaluations from teachers the social skills are the best acquired in the kindergarten (M=4.03), but a considerable decline can be witnessed on transition to school. The results are the weakest in the end of the first grade (M=3.89). This outcome is understandable, because commencing school demands great effort and readiness to adapt to new conditions, new requirements, new companions and new ways of studying.

Table 1. Comparison of the means of the evaluations on children`s social skills at the end of the kindergarten, the 1st and the 3rd grade.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Social skills by the end of kindergarten	4.03	95	.704	.072
	Social skills of the 1 st grade pupils	3.89	95	.836	.086
Pair 2	Social skills by the end of kindergarten	4.05	78	.743	.084
	Social skills of the 3 rd grade pupils	3.98	78	.698	.079
Pair 3	Social skills of the 1 st grade pupils	3.93	79	.811	.091
	Social skills of the 3 rd grade pupils	3.99	79	.695	.078

On the basis of Table 1 it can be claimed that the mean teacher evaluations on the level of children`s social skills in the kindergarten and at school are similar; also the comparison of the results of the first and the third grade shows similar level of development of social skills in the same group of children. The results of the correlation analysis (see Table 2) concerning the social skills of the given group of children show that the level of social skills acquired in the previous stage of education has high correlation with the level acquired on the following stage.

Table 2. Correlation among different stages of study.

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Social skills by the end of kindergarten and the 1 st grade	95	.427	0.000
Pair 2	Social skills by the end of kindergarten and the 3 rd grade	78	.459	0.000
Pair 3	Social skills by the end of the 1 st and the 3 rd grade	79	.711	0.000

Teachers` evaluations on the level of children`s social skills before commencing school. Based on the most relevant social competences stated in the Framework Curriculum of Preschool Education that a child commencing school should have acquired, four social skills that children have acquired the best and the worst are examined.

Table 3. The best and the worst acquired social skills before commencing school.

	Mean	Min	Max	N
Communication with other children	4.27	2	5	95
Communication with adults	4.27	1	5	95
Acting together with other children	4.36	1	5	95
Expressing one`s feelings	4.16	2	5	95
Considering other people`s feelings	3.70	1	5	94
Participating in solving conflicts	3.62	1	5	95
Accepting specialties of the group	3.87	1	5	94
Following the agreed rules	3.98	1	5	94

Leaning on the categories of the taxonomy of positive behavior it can be claimed that very good results have been obtained in the category measuring peer relation skills. Children commencing

school are eager to act with peers (M=4.36). In kindergarten the focus on peer relations is strong, because studying is realized through games, directed towards playing and considering peers, and it favors child's activity. Similarly, playful activity promotes the formation of communication skills with peers (M=4.27) and with adults (M=4.27). Relationships with peers prove to be important already in a very early age. Peers are good playmates, confidants, and offer support in case of stress. Children can be powerful reciprocal factors of socializing, promoting each other's social and emotional development.

The self-management skills are less effectively acquired; they require a child to have good skills in self-perception, but unfortunately in that age it is quite complicated, because children are yet to learn how to perceive themselves, how to express and form their wishes and feelings.

As follows, three strongest and three weakest constituent skills in boys and girls are presented in the table along with the skills that showed statistically significant differences.

In the beginning of the study we established the hypotheses that in the end of kindergarten there are no differences between social skills in boys and girls. In order to determine the differences SPSS set was used and the calculations were made by t-test of which the null hypothesis (the averages do not show statistically significant differences) was controlled (Kendall & Stuart 1976). The significance level on data analysis is 0.05 ($\alpha=.95$), based on which the critical significance probability is 0.05 ($p=0.05$). The most important characteristics of t-test are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison between the levels of social skills in boys and girls before commencing school.

Social skill	Child's gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Most important characteristics of t-test	
					t-value	p
Waiting one's turn in the group	boy	53	3.66	.979	-4.091	0.000
	girl	40	4.38	.705		
Communication with other children	boy	54	4.04	.931		
	girl	41	4.59	.670		
Communication with adults	boy	54	4.13	.953		
	girl	41	4.46	.809		
Acting together with other children	boy	54	4.22	.925		
	girl	41	4.54	.674		
Expressing one's feelings	boy	54	4.04	.868		
	girl	41	4.32	.756		
Considering other people's feelings	boy	54	3.41	.901		
	girl	40	4.10	.778		
Wish to help others	boy	54	3.57	1.057	-5.123	0.000
	girl	40	4.48	.640		
Participating in solving conflicts	boy	54	3.37	1.202	-2.776	0.007
	girl	41	3.95	.835		
Accepting specialties of the group	boy	54	3.50	.966		
	girl	40	4.38	.705		
Following the agreed rules	boy	54	3.72	1.017	-3.413	0.001
	girl	40	4.33	.694		

Based on the data concerning mean evaluations in Table 4 that shows the level of acquired social skills in boys and girls in the end of the kindergarten, we can claim that girls have acquired social skills on very good level; the results of boys are between good and very good on the scale. The highest teacher evaluations have been given in the category of peer relations, both for girls and boys. Girls are especially motivated to communicate with peers (M=4.59), act with other children (M=4.54), and help other people (M=4.48). Boys are mainly interested in acting with other children (M=4.22), but also in communicating with adults (M=4.13). The weakest results

in acquiring social skills are in the categories of self-management and assertion skills, this also being similar for boys and girls.

Statistically significant differences between acquiring social skills in girls and boys are shown in acquiring the constituent skills classified into the categories of peer relations and self-management (see Table 4).

Based on t-test results we can claim at 95% significance level that there are statistically significant differences in the averages of the social constituent skills in boys and girls, thus we have disproven the null hypothesis of t-test and adopted an alternative hypothesis – in acquiring social skills boys and girls have statistically significant differences in the constituent skills categories of peer relations (in 1 constituent skill) and self management (in 3 constituents skills) in favor for girls.

Teacher evaluations on the level of children`s social skills at the end of the 1st and the 3rd grade. Children are under the direct influence of school environment for several hours a day. School opens a considerably wider world for children than kindergarten or home can offer. School becomes an environment for children where they develop their ability to learn as well as their social skills and where their beliefs, abilities, and interests find clearer output. Being successful in learning process presupposes not simply intellectual abilities, but an important role is played also by basic social skills supporting these.

For one hypothesis – there are no differences between acquiring social skills in students in grades 1 and 3 – t-test was carried out to discover statistical differences, in which the validity of null hypothesis (the averages do not show statistically significant differences) was controlled. The most important characteristics of t-test are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison between the best and the worst acquired social skills at the end of the 1st and the 3rd grade.

Social skills	Grade	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Most important characteristics of t-test	
					t-value	p
Pupil has learned to trust his/her ability to learn.	1 st grade	96	4.09	.974	-2.867	0.005
	3 rd grade	78	3.83	.903		
Pupil dares to accept new challenges in learning.	1 st grade	96	3.92	.981		
	3 rd grade	79	3.82	.944		
Pupil has acquired skills of good behavior.	1 st grade	96	4.08	.981		
	3 rd grade	78	4.13	.903		
Pupil is prepared to learn continuously.	1 st grade	96	4.06	1.024		
	3 rd grade	79	3.97	.960		
Pupil has learned to develop his/her learning skills.	1 st grade	95	3.79	.921		
	3 rd grade	79	3.82	.930		
Pupil has learned to work in pairs.	1 st grade	96	3.97	.967		
	3 rd grade	79	4.25	.792		
Pupil has learned to understand the equality of all groups in learning.	1 st grade	96	3.94	.916		
	3 rd grade	79	4.19	.769		
Pupil has learned to be critical in procuring knowledge.	1 st grade	96	3.46	1.004		
	3 rd grade	79	3.62	.910		
Pupil has learned to use the means for communicating knowledge and information.	1 st grade	94	3.47	.991		
	3 rd grade	79	3.87	.868		
Pupil has become a responsible member of society.	1 st grade	96	3.64	1.116		
	3 rd grade	79	3.87	.897		
Pupil has learned to behave according to good practice.	1 st grade	95	4.09	.968		
	3 rd grade	79	4.22	.811		

Table 5 shows the analysis of the study results on the 1st and the 3rd grade that is based on the categories of the taxonomy of positive behavior and shows higher result for the children in the 3rd grade. In more cases than at the end of the 1st grade, teachers have given very good evaluations on different constituent skills at the end of the 3rd grade. At the end of the 1st grade teachers have given very good evaluations in the categories of compliance and self-management. Teacher evaluations show that pupils have learned to behave according to good practice (M=4.09) and believe in their ability to study (M=4.09). Similarly, children have adopted the regulations for good behavior (M=4.08) and manners. At the end of the 3rd grade teachers have given very good evaluations in the categories of compliance, assertion skills and peer relations. Teacher evaluations show that pupils have acquired necessary skills for working in pairs (M=4.25), also the manners of good behavior (M=4.22), and they have understood that all groups are equal in learning, irrespective of their members (M=4.19).

Both at the end of the 1st and the 3rd grade, weaker development can be seen in the category of academic skills, where teachers have given less good evaluations on children's skills to procure and critically evaluate information (1st grade M=3.46 and 3rd grade M=3.62) and to use the means for communicating knowledge and information (1st grade M=3.47 and 3rd grade M=3.87). From the data on the 3rd grade we can point out the pupils' low desire to accept new challenges in learning (M=3.82). The domain of social skills can be seen as an important basis in the schooling and education process that enables children to function in school environment.

Based on t-test results we can claim at 95% significance level that in grades 1 and 3 there are statistically significant differences in the averages of social constituent skills in case of one constituent skill, i.e. using the means for communicating knowledge and information in the category *academic skills* (p=0,005). We have disproven the null hypothesis of t-test in case of one constituent skill and adopted an alternative hypothesis.

Former studies have shown differences in functioning in school environment between boys and girls. Next it will be studied, which are the results of the two genders in achieving social skills.

Primarily we give an outlook on the level of social skills of the boys and girls in the 1st grade.

For the established hypothesis – there are no differences between acquiring social skills in boys and girls in the 1st grade – t-test was carried out to discover statistical differences, in which the validity of null hypothesis (the averages do not show statistically significant differences) was controlled. The most important characteristics of t-test are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparison of mean evaluations on the social skills of the boys and girls by the end of the 1st grade.

Social skill	Child's gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Most important characteristics of t-test	
					t-value	p
Pupil is eager to learn.	boy	54	3.70	1.143	-3.659	0.000
	girl	42	4.45	.861		
Pupil has learned to trust his/her ability to learn.	boy	54	3.93	1.043		
	girl	42	4.31	.841		
Pupil has acquired skills of good behavior.	boy	54	3.70	1.039	-5.055	0.000
	girl	42	4.57	.630		
Pupil is prepared to learn continuously.	boy	54	3.78	1.160	-3.452	0.001
	girl	42	4.43	.668		
Pupil has learned to take responsibility for his/her learning.	boy	54	3.54	1.284	-3.651	0.000
	girl	42	4.33	.846		
Pupil has learned to express his/her thoughts.	boy	53	3.91	1.097		
	girl	41	4.20	.749		
Pupil has learned to work individually.	boy	54	3.74	1.262	-2.499	0.014
	girl	42	4.26	.767		
Pupil has learned to understand the equality of all groups in learning.	boy	54	3.85	.940		
	girl	42	4.05	.882		

Social skill	Child's gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Most important characteristics of t-test	
					t-value	p
Pupil has learned to work in a group.	boy	54	3.57	1.039	-3.008	0.003
	girl	42	4.14	.814		
Pupil has learned to be critical in procuring knowledge.	boy	54	3.41	1.000		
	girl	42	3.52	1.018		
Pupil has learned to consider other people's interests.	boy	54	3.57	1.075	-3.484	0.001
	girl	41	4.24	.799		
Pupil has learned to use the means for communicating knowledge and information.	boy	53	3.42	1.100		
	girl	41	3.54	.840		
Pupil has become a responsible member of society.	boy	54	3.39	1.188	-2.599	0.011
	girl	42	3.95	.936		
Pupil has learned to behave according to good practice.	boy	54	3.72	1.054		
	girl	41	4.54	.840		
Pupil has learned to express him/herself in a versatile way.	boy	54	3.54	1.177	-2.075	0.041
	girl	42	3.98	.897		

Analyzing the level of achievement of the social skills in the 1st grade boys and girls, we have to recognize the superiority of the girls' results, because the teacher evaluations on the indicators of their social skills are prevalingly very good. The teacher evaluations on the corresponding skills of boys are prevalingly good. Girls have higher results in the categories of academic skills and compliance. The 1st grade girls have very well acquired the rules of good behavior ($M=4.57$), adopted good manners ($M=4.54$) and they are eager to learn ($M=4.45$). Boys have the best results in the categories of self-management, academic skills, and compliance. The best results for boys stem from the indicators of the self-management category, which evaluates their belief in their ability to learn ($M=3.93$). Good evaluations are given also to the boys' expression ($M=3.91$) and their understanding that all the groups are equal in learning ($M=3.85$).

Weaker results in both boys and girls are shown mainly in the category of academic skills. Hence, deficiencies in learning process can be noticed in the development of social skills that support learning, which may be related to dutifully memorizing the required study material without sufficiently thinking it through.

Statistically significant differences between boys and girls in acquiring social skills can be seen in all the categories of the taxonomy of positive behavior. The highest number of differences can be seen in the categories of self-management, academic skills, and compliance.

Based on t-test results we can claim at 95% significance level that there are statistically significant differences for boys and girls in the averages of social constituent skills in the 1st grade, thus have disproven the null hypothesis of t-test and adopted an alternative hypothesis - there are statistically significant differences for boys and girls in acquiring social skills in the 1st grade and these are always in favor of the girls.

Table 7 shows differences for boys and girls in acquiring social skills in the 3rd grade. T-test was carried out to discover these differences, and the validity of null hypothesis (the averages do not show statistically significant differences) was controlled.

Table 7. Comparison between the evaluations on the social skills of boys and girls by the end of 3rd grade

Social skill	Child's gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Most important characteristics of t-test	
					t-value	p
Pupil has learned to trust his/her ability to learn.	boy	43	3.79	1.013		
	girl	35	3.89	.758		
Pupil dares to accept new challenges in learning.	boy	43	3.74	1.093		
	girl	36	3.92	.732		
Pupil has acquired skills of good behavior.	boy	43	3.84	.974		
	girl	35	4.49	.658		
Pupil has learned to develop his/her learning skills.	boy	43	3.63	1.001	-2.121	0.037
	girl	36	4.06	.791		
Pupil has learned to work individually.	boy	43	3.86	1.167	-2.330	0.023
	girl	36	4.33	.586		
Pupil has learned to work in pairs.	boy	43	4.05	.899		
	girl	36	4.50	.561		
Pupil has learned to work in a group.	boy	43	3.84	.924		
	girl	36	4.47	.654		
Pupil has learned to understand the equality of all groups in learning.	boy	43	4.07	.828		
	girl	36	4.33	.676		
Pupil has learned to be critical in procuring knowledge.	boy	43	3.56	1.053		
	girl	36	3.69	.710		
Pupil has learned to use the means for communicating knowledge and information.	boy	43	3.84	.898		
	girl	36	3.92	.841		
Pupil has become a responsible member of society.	boy	43	3.60	.877		
	girl	36	4.19	.822		
Pupil has learned to behave according to good practice.	boy	43	4.00	.873		
	girl	36	4.47	.654		

Analyzing teacher evaluations on the acquisition of the social skills in the 3rd grade boys and girls, we recognize that the results of both boys and girls are good and very good, although slightly higher indicators can be noticed in evaluations given to girls. At the end of the 3rd grade girls have obtained very good results in the assertion skills category, which shows that they have acquired very good skills in working on pairs (M=4.50) or in a group (M= 4.47). The results indicate the girls' skill to be a member of a group and act in group according to required social roles. Similarly, their good behavioral skills (M=4.49) can be pointed out, which is a prerequisite for the formation and preservation of normally functioning group relationships. In case of 3rd grade boys good results in such skills as considering equality principles in learning in groups (M=4.07) can be pointed out. They have also acquired skills to work together with peers (M=4.05), which is definitely supported by following good behavioral manners (M=4.00).

Weaker results in both boys and girls are shown mainly in the categories of academic skills and self-management, which assert less good results in critically judging their acquisition of knowledge (girls M=3.69 and boys M=3.56), as well as in accepting new challenges and communicating information. The results also show that pupils' belief in their ability to learn is not as strong as before.

Statistically significant differences between boys and girls in acquiring social skills can be seen in the indicators of the categories of academic skills and self-management, which measure the level of pupils' skill of working independently (p=0.023) and the level of their learning skills (p=0.037).). Based on t-test results we can claim at 95% significance level that in 2 constituent

skills there are statistically significant differences for boys and girls in the averages of social constituent skills in the 3rd grade and the differences are in favor of the girls.

In brief, it can be said that in acquiring social skills differences between boys and girls have diminished by the 3rd grade and they have deficiencies in similar constituent skills.

Conclusions

The present study showed the acquisition of social skills in children in kindergarten, the 1st grade, and the 3rd grade, leaning on the categories of the taxonomy of positive behavior. Supported by the results of the study we can claim that in general the level of social skills in all the groups participating in the study was higher than average; on the whole these skills can be evaluated as good. The evaluations from pre-school teachers emphasized the social skills, which belong to the peer relations category. The weakest results present at the end of the kindergarten were obtained in social skills, which belong to the categories of self-management and assertion skills.

The best results in the 1st grade were obtained in the categories of compliance and self-management. At the end of the 3rd grade very good results were obtained in the categories of compliance, assertion skills, and peer relations. Weaker development of social skills at the end of the 1st and the 3rd grade was witnessed in the academic skills category. Comparing the acquisition of social skills in the 1st and in the 3rd grade, statistically significant difference can be seen in one constituent skill in the academic skill category.

Comparing the acquisition of social skills in the 1st grade boys and girls it becomes evident that in general, girls have obtained higher evaluations from the teachers. Very good results in girls can be seen in the categories of academic skills and compliance; in boys very good results are obtained in single skills in the categories of self-management, academic skills, and compliance. Weaker results in both boys and girls are present in the academic skills category. Statistically significant differences between the acquisition of social skills in boys and girls can be noticed in all the categories of the taxonomy of positive behavior.

In the 3rd grade, the girls` social skills have again received higher teacher evaluations than the social skills of boys. At the end of the 3rd grade girls have obtained very good results in assertion skills category. Teacher evaluations give no prevailing category for boys, only good results in single skills. In case of both girls and boys weaker social skills can be seen in the categories of academic skills and self-management. Statistically significant differences are shown in the categories of academic skills and self-management of boys and girls.

The research results presented in this article indicate to the good and sustained traditions of pre-school and primary education in Estonia, which value the principles of child-centered pedagogy. Among other things the results of the social skills treated in the article clearly indicate to deficiencies, e.g. both in kindergarten and at school not enough attention is paid on conscious development of positive study experiences and necessary preconditions for studying. Social behavior presupposes various qualities, for instance healthy self-confidence, balanced emotional life, skill to contemplate, ability to control and assess one`s own behavior, and understand other people. This is not simply a link in a chain of mental development, for instance the one of emotional life and intellectual development, but it can be claimed that a person`s self image and approach to the world, his/her whole personality, is reflected by his/her social behavior (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 1992: 3-4).

So, teachers in schools have to pay more attention to the development of learning motivation as well as behavioral norms and self-expression skills. Current educational policy emphasizes on accountability, particularly that schools and classrooms should be held more responsible for the outcomes they produce. Children`s competencies depend largely on the quality of their experiences in educational settings, it makes sense to assess, for accountability purposes, the quality of those settings-in short, to have accountability standards for classrooms. An Estonian teacher is often worried about fulfilling the extensive curriculum; therefore it is sometimes thought that the development of social environment in a classroom wastes valuable learning-teaching time. However, social problems in a school are often the reason for missing classes and dropout from

a school. Children, who in some way are different from others (another language environment, overweight, speech deficiency etc.), have more difficulties to be accepted in a group. A child, who has no opportunity to experience acceptance from others, seeks for attention with disruptive, challenging or hostile behavior.

The study findings can also give more understanding about national curriculum itself. Teachers' assessments about children's learning generally indicate a considerably high level of learning in Estonia. The danger to the sustainable development of Estonian society lies in the excessive worship of being successful since the very early age, which makes parents and teachers attempt to achieve fast and tangible results such as subject-related skills, and pay less attention to ethical and social values. From the point of view of humanist and sustainable development of the society, it is considerably significant in the long run to attach more importance to ethical and social values.

References

- Caldarella, P. & Merrell, K.W. (1997). Common dimensions of social skills of children and adolescents: A Taxonomy of positive behaviors. *School Psychology Review*, 26(2), (264-271).
- Claxton, G. & Carr, M. (2004). A framework for teaching learning: the dynamics of dispositions', *Early Years*, 24(1): 87-97.
- Eaude, T. (2006). *Children's Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development: Primary and Early Years*. Learning Matters: Exeter.
- Framework Curriculum of Primary Education (1999). (Alushariduse raamõppekava). *RT I*. 80, 737
- Katz, L. (1995) *Talk with Teachers of Young Children*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Keltikangas-Järvinen, L. (1992). *Agressiivne laps. Kuidas suunata lapse isiksuse arengut. [Aggressive child. How to direct the development of child's personality]* Tallinn: Koolibri
- Kendall, M., Stuart, A. (1976). *Mnogomernõi statistit eski analis i vremennõje rjadõ*. Moskva: izdatelstvo Nauka
- Kontos, S., & Wilcox-Herzog, A. (1997). Teachers' interactions with children: Why are they so important? *Young Children*, 52(2), 4-12.
- National Curriculum of Basic and Secondary School (2002). (Põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava).- *RT I* 2002, 20,116.
- Saat, H. (2005). Social skills: conception, possibilities for developing and assessing at school. From: General skills – pupil's development and its promotion at school (pp. 129-163). Tartu University Press.
- Schaffer, H.R. Zone of Proximal Development and: Cultural Tools Scaffolding Guided Participation (pp125-129). In: *Key concepts in Developmental Psychology*. Sage Publications: London. Thousand Oaks. New Delhi.
- Sheridan, S. M. & Walker, D. (1999). Social skills in Context: Considerations for Assessment, intervention, and generalization. In Reynolds, C. R. & T. B. Gutkin. *The Handbook of School Psychology*, (3th ed.), (pp. 686-708). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Sikka, H., Vikat, M. (2005). Assessment of preschool children entering school: Perspectives of interaction and integration. *Journal of Teacher Education and Training*, Vol. 5, 2005, 70-80.
- Spivack, G., & Shure, M. B. (1982). The cognition of social adjustment: Interpersonal cognitive problem solving thinking. In B. B. Lahey & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), *Advances in clinical child psychology* (Vol. 5. pp. 323-372). New York: Plenum.
- Talts, L. (2003). The role of preschool education and its influence on child's further coping at school. *Journal of Teacher Education and Training*, Vol. 2, 2003, 93-100.
- Talts, L. (2008). Transition process from kindergarten to school: an empirical analysis. *International views of early childhood education*, 1, 9-17.
- Talts, L. Mägi, E. (2005). School readiness as a continuing process: An empirical analysis. *Journal of teacher Education and Training*, Vol 5, 80-90.

Tudge, J. (1990). Vygotsky and education. Instructional implications and applications of socio-historical psychology. L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development, and peer collaboration: Implications for classroom practices* (pp.155-171). Cambridge University Press.

Vygotski, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotski, L.S. (1981). The genesis of higher mental functions. -J.V. Wertch (ed.) *The concept of activity in Soviet Psychology*. Amork, NY: Sharp.

*Advised by Ene Mägi,
Tallinn University, Estonia*

Airi Kukk

Lecturer at Tallinn University (Department of Primary School Education), Estonia.

Narva Street, 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia.

Phone: +3726199710.

E-mail: airi.kukk@tlu.ee

Website: <http://www.tlu.ee/index.php?LangID=2&CatID=1400>

Leida Talts

Professor at Tallinn University (Department of Primary School Education), Head of Chair of Primary School Education; Head of School of Doctoral Studies, Estonia.

Narva Street, 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia.

Phone: +372 6199710.

E-mail: leida.talts@tlu.ee

Website: <http://www.tlu.ee/index.php?LangID=2&CatID=1400>

Helle Sikka

Associate professor at Tallinn University (Department of Primary School Education), Estonia.

Narva Street, 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia.

Phone: +372 6199710.

E-mail: helle.sikka@tlu.ee

Website: <http://www.tlu.ee/index.php?LangID=2&CatID=1400>