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Children excluding other children from play through passive resistance by ignoring and neglecting

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how children express themselves in play situations that occur in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in the context of their emotional and social development. The main research question was: *Which communicative recourses do children use to negotiate in play situations? How is exclusion carried out during play?* A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this study because it offers a way to examine children's social engagements with both their peers and ECEC staff in their everyday ECEC environment. The study was conducted at eight different ECEC centres and one pre-school throughout the Swedish-speaking regions of Finland. The target group for the observations was children aged 3–6 years. At the time of the observations, the groups at the ECEC centres and the pre-school were made up of 10–20 children. We identified an overarching category of exclusion, which shows how children *limit* each other during play; in this article, we analyze how this is done through the imposing of various features of limits, passive resistance, and ignoring and neglecting others. To this end, the article offers detailed analysis of play situations showing children's social and emotional capacities while also highlighting the need to examine this issue more thoroughly.

Keywords: *exclusion, social and emotional development, play, video recordings, early childhood*

Introduction

Children's levels of emotional and social competence are of great importance to their overall well-being, and will also affect their learning and development later in life (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Kirk & Jay, 2018; Kuorelahti et al., 2012; Kurki, 2017). There is scientific evidence showing that events that take place in early childhood will affect the health and well-being of an individual for the rest of their life (Arnott, 2018; Sroufe et al., 2010; Tickell, 2011). For example, research has shown that the socio-emotional development that takes place during early childhood is more intimately intertwined with academic success than was previously assumed (Heller et al., 2012; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Overall, there is a lack of research on how socio-emotional development is related to social interaction and communication, especially when it comes to understanding the relationships between social interaction, bullying, exclusion, and inclusion in relation to children's socio-emotional expressions (Höistad, 2005; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Kirves & Stoor-Grenner, 2010; Tellgren, 2004)

In terms of the importance of children's emotional and social development, this study closely examines how children express themselves in play situations that occur in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings; these situations make up a large part of a typical day at ECEC (Durlak et al., 2017; Gibson et al., 2017; Määttä et al., 2017). In this case, play is defined as an arena in which relationships change and a variety of emotional expressions occur (Arnott, 2018; Howe & Leach, 2018), making it a place for children's social and emotional competencies to become visible. Play is a central part of a child's early years and examining play events can offer valuable insight into how children's social and emotional competencies and experiences are formed. In play, children express themselves both as individuals and as parts of different social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, and functionality amongst others. Though this study does not specifically include these categorizations in its analysis, they remain a central part of this research and its goal of better understanding how inclusion and exclusion can be defined.

One method for understanding socio-emotional development involves defining emotional development and social development and as separate entities that can be categorised in different ways. Kirk and Jay (2018) define emotional competence as the ability to recognise emotions and regulate strong ones to maintain effective relationships with others while Denham (2006, 2007) divides emotional development into three main abilities, namely emotion recognition, emotion expressiveness and communication, and emotion regulation. Regarding social development, Kirk and Jay (2018) define it more generally, understanding it as the learning of the values, knowledge, and skills that enable children to relate to others effectively and contribute to their families, schools, and communities in positive ways. Papadopoulou et al. (2014) define social competence as

broader than emotional competence and include everything from interpersonal social skills and abilities, such as problem-solving (Howe et al., 2002) and peer relations (including play, friendships, and prosocial skills) (Cutting & Dunn, 2006), to positive interactions, sharing, and respecting others (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; McClelland et al., 2000) in its definition. Intrapersonal skills related to self-regulation and frustration tolerance are also part of social development (Eisenberg et al., 2002). In this study, these aspects of social and emotional competencies become visible in the ways in which children communicate and interact in play.

The aim of this study is therefore to more closely examine free play situations in relation to the aforementioned aspects of children's social and emotional expressions via the analysis of communicative elements in play in line with previous. The goal is to illuminate the most significant aspects of play in order to further support children in terms of their social and emotional development. In sum, the main research question is: *Which communicative recourses do children use in order to negotiate in play situations? How is exclusion carried out during play?*

Theoretical framework

Most children form their first peer cultures during play in the context of early childhood education (Corsaro, 2000; Gibson et al., 2019; Pramling et al., 2021). During play, children negotiate their relationships, the use of toys, and the direction and content of their play. Play negotiation is conducted multimodally, meaning both verbally and non-verbally, with the help of looks, facial expressions, and gestures (Goodwin, 2006; Holm Kvist & Cekaite, 2021). Children use various kinds of strategies in their negotiations and can change their strategy as needed (Alvestad, 2010; Arnott, 2018; Hayward et al., 2019; Kurki et al., 2017). Play negotiations are multifaceted and include dimensions of, among other things, power (Ahn, 2010; Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Wood, 2014) and conflict (Laursen & Adams, 2018).

The central strategies in children's play negotiations are inclusion in and exclusion from play. William Corsaro defined 15 joining strategies that children use when they want to be included in play (Corsaro, 1979); they will often attempt different strategies during the same negotiation in order to achieve their aim. Joining play, as well as including others in play, is here considered a key moment in which children's socioemotional skills become visible.

Exclusion from play occurs during free play and can be difficult for professionals to observe (Bullock, 2002; Denham et al., 2012; Höistad, 2005; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Kirves & Stoor-Grenner, 2010; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2017). One reason for this is that exclusion can be camouflaged within the theme of the play; forms of exclusion are created

within a given play situation to fit that context (Tellgren, 2004). Additionally, it is difficult to define exclusion because its possible variations. As researchers have pointed out, social exclusion can also be about protecting the play, and that significantly complicates the situation (Alvestad, 2010; Corsaro, 2018; Tellgren, 2004). It is also important to note that research has shown that children as young as three can have established roles in play (Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012).

Joining play, or being included by others, is done in several ways, but negotiating rules and play content is a central way to join. In a play situation involving more than one participant, a child's verbal and non-verbal expressiveness needs to be accepted by one or more of those already playing (Bateman, 2011).

Curran (1999) and Cobb-Moore et al. (2009) highlight explicit rules that direct social behaviours within children's play. Children can choose to negotiate with, follow, or ignore these rules. Implicit rules in children's play can, at best, contribute to a development of free play, so that every child is given the potential to contribute (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Curran, 1999). One example of an implicit rule in free play involves the distinguishing between fantasy and reality, even if the play takes place in the realm of fantasy, such that the children involve one another and sustain the play by adhering to an adequate level of action and by accepting each other's imaginative suggestions and contributions (Curran, 1999).

In this study, one element of social and emotional skills and experiences is defined as the ways in which children negotiate in play and include or exclude each other, with a special focus on joining play and how exclusion happens. Including or excluding other children can be a sign of how well children understand other's social and emotional needs and take these into consideration.

Exclusion through passive resistance – ignoring or neglecting

Being ignored is a phenomenon that several researchers have described as psychological bullying. Both Höistad (2005) and Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) consider ignoring to be a key a part of psychological bullying. Höistad (2005) defines it as a behaviour in which the victim is treated as non-existent; other children turn their back on the victim and do not answer when they speak. Other researchers choose to call psychological bullying either relational aggression or social aggression, and describe it as involving manipulating, ignoring, nasty gossiping, and repeated and indirect acts intended to cause harm (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 1999; Underwood, 2003). Underwood (2003) also notes that this type of aggression is often more powerful since it is more indirectly expressed and therefore harder to identify. Among children, it can mean circulating lies about someone, calling them mean names, or excluding or neglecting someone as a group (Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Fanger et al. (2012) state that this type of behaviour in children's play often manifests in situations in which a child tries to gain access to the play and their attempts are deliberately left unanswered. Tellgren (2004) asserts that this behaviour can occur in situations in which children have already been allowed to join the play. In this case, a child might have an active role that is suddenly taken away. According to Fanger et al. (2012), it is possible to determine if a child is being intentionally ignored or neglected by their playmates by reflecting on how aware the child seems to be that they are being ignored, and by paying attention to whether or not several children are ignoring the child simultaneously.

Exclusion in play does not necessarily occur through someone taking the initiative to exclude someone from the play space; it can also occur through passive resistance. Ignoring or neglecting someone usually differs from other exclusion strategies; in the context of ignoring and neglecting, exclusion occurs through passivity, which Fanger et al. (2012) call lack of response. Passive resistance as a strategy emerges when children exclude another child to deliberately prevent them from taking part in the play, even if this primarily happens through lack of response. In the three representative examples in the results section, we see how children who try to enter the play are subjected to passive resistance; they are kept outside the play space in that they receive neither affirmation nor responses.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was chosen to examine the theme of this study because it facilitates nuanced reasoning regarding the ways in which communication and interaction occur and the understanding of children's socio-emotional expressions (Allison, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018).

A cross-sectional study in which the data material consists of snapshots of free play across the different ECEC centres was conducted. The goal was to gather information about how things are or were at a specific moment in a group of participants, rather than to observe changes and development over a longer period (Denscombe, 2014).

The data consisted of snapshots of free play from the different ECEC centres. These snapshots provided close insights into the children's social interactions and play with their peers within the ECEC centres (Allison, 2007). The core methodology involved gathering information about how things are or were at a certain point in time for a group of participants rather than to observe changes and development over a longer period (Denscombe, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Participatory observations

This cross-sectional study adopted a qualitative approach consisting of observation, specifically participatory observation. Joining a natural environment for a given period makes it possible to examine, experience, and retrospectively represent the social life and social processes that occurred in that environment (Emerson et al., 2011). This was the focus of this study. By stepping in as an observant stranger and trying to acclimatise to a previously unfamiliar ECEC setting or group, the researcher can become aware of details that are banal, irrelevant, or invisible to the other participants. These details are often the key to understanding the underlying structures of a culture (Giampietro & Molle, 2008). The participatory observations that were made in this study yielded data regarding children's play as part of their everyday ECEC and pre-school routines.

Material, limitations, and research process

The study was carried out at eight different ECEC centres and one pre-school throughout the Swedish-speaking regions of Finland; the Swedish-speaking community makes up about 6% of the Finnish population. In Finnish ECEC centres, children aged 1–6 are placed in groups of about 15–20 children. The ECEC centres were located in both cities and rural areas and are of different sizes in order to capture different kinds of ECEC environments. The target group for the observations was children aged 3 to 6 years. In the examples represented, the children's ages ranged from 4 to 5. At the time of observation, the group sizes at the ECEC centres and the pre-school ranged from about 10 to 20 children.

During the participatory observation, video recordings were made of play in each ECEC group over the course of one day. The filmed sequences ranged from 30 seconds to 5 minutes in length and were taken by two of the authors. The recordings started after a short period of observation of the play to ensure consistent interaction between the children and also confirm that they would not react to the presence of the researcher. Factors that affected the length of the filmed sequences included change of play or playground, the appearance of children who were not allowed to be filmed, and interruptions such as lunch breaks or schedule changes. An average of one hour of free play was filmed during each ECEC centre visit, meaning that the collected data amounted to approximately nine hours of footage. Since the focus of the research question is on communicative resources during free play, films depicting planned activities initiated by adults have been excluded from this analysis. The researchers maintained as much neutrality as possible throughout the play situations to keep from disturbing the play while still being available for questions raised by the children.

Films with poor sound quality were also omitted as was footage of the children playing individually. A total of 58 sequences were transcribed, amounting to approximately two hours of raw data that was preliminarily analysed. Out of this material, 26 sequences were

chosen for more thorough analysis and presentation; these also serve as a backdrop against which the three sequences we have chosen to highlight can be interpreted.

Data processing and method of analysis

In qualitative research, transcription is the process by which parts of spoken language are reproduced in written form for the purpose of analysis and the communication of new discoveries (Cowan, 2013). In fact, the transcription process is considered a kind of negotiation; the negotiation involves making both minor and major decisions at an early stage in relation to the future analysis (Heikkilä, 2017). One such decision, according to Cowan (2013), involves choosing a transcription technique that does justice to the material such that as many types of expression as possible emerge in a way that is clear and transparent.

The video observations were processed by means of multimodal interaction analysis (Cowan, 2013; Norris, 2013). All video sequences were first examined in their entirety, without interruption, one to three times per ECEC centre. The next step, conducted by two of the researchers, involved the selection of sequences that primarily fulfilled the following criteria: free play, interaction between at least two children, and acceptable lighting and sound quality. In the third step of the analysis, we found a common, frequently occurring pattern in the play negotiations. The chosen video sequences were then analysed through a transcription scheme that captured both verbal and non-verbal communication in the forms of time, speech, body language/gestures, and looks. Heikkilä (2017) asserts that expanding the content of a transcription by exclusively focusing on speech and the representation of an activity in words to include other forms of communication is the basis of multimodal interaction analysis. Speech, body language/gestures, and looks were selected as modes of the analysis as they are both visible and audible in children's play and frequently used by children due to different levels of language development. Norris (2013) highlights the use of multimodal interaction analysis as a holistic methodological framework; this framework provides a comprehensive overview of what is being studied and facilitates the integration of the verbal and non-verbal in the analysis while also making it possible to connect these two methods of communication with material objects and the environment in which the individuals are interacting.

After the video sequences from each ECEC centre had been multimodally transcribed using the transcription scheme, the material was coded both using numbers and patterns of action (cf. Craig et al., 2021; Devi et al., 2020; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) according to the following criteria: type of play, recurring social and emotional expressions, how they emerged in the play situation, and the types of strategies are used

in the play. At this stage, the phenomenon of exclusion was noted to be prevalent in the play negotiations and was selected as a main theme.

The analysis of the material brought our attention to the negotiations that took place during free play; the sub-phenomena that emerged included the different types of exclusion events that the children took part in when joining play. Play negotiations can be considered to be a concentrated form of children's socio-emotional competencies.

Ethical considerations

The study has actively adhered to the Guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity in every capacity (TENK, 2012). Naturally, a study in which the primary material consists of video observations of playing children resulted in the research team facing a number of ethical considerations. These ethical considerations, all equally important, were tackled in different ways and discussions were ongoing in this regard (Bodén, 2021).

After each participating municipality gave its approval for the conducting of research at the centres in question, the children's guardians received a form that contained information about the study, and they were asked to give consent in order for their children to take part. No children were filmed without parental consent. To guarantee the anonymity of the children, their names were changed at the transcription stage; additionally, some dialectal expressions were standardised so that the children's regional origin could not be detected. When filming, the researchers also considered ethical issues in relation to the children and respected any child's wish not to be filmed, even if parental consent had been received.

Ethics were also considered throughout the ongoing video recordings (Peters et al., 2021). Firstly, those children who were not included in the study were not recorded; when they accidentally entered a situation in which recording was taking place, the recording was stopped, and the resulting tape was not used for any analysis. Secondly, the children were offered different ways to say no to filming, including saying "no", putting up a hand, turning their back to the researcher, or shaking their head. Thirdly, the researcher doing the video recordings attempted to remain vigilant for any other signs that the children did not want to be filmed.

Results

In our analysis, we chiefly identified an overarching category of exclusion which shows how children *limit* each other during play. Within this overarching category, we found three sub-categories that demonstrate how exclusion through imposing limits features in

various ways: 1) exclusion through manoeuvring by using fantasy and fiction, 2) exclusion through passive resistance by ignoring and neglecting, and 3) exclusion through favouritism by prioritising certain children. In this article, the second subcategory is presented; the others are published elsewhere (Donner et al., 2022).

Eleven sequences of the category of exclusion through passive resistance by either ignoring or neglecting were found upon analysis of the empirical material.

The second sub-category includes three descriptions of examples from the data. The examples are then further analysed, linked to previous research in the field, and connected to the act of exclusion as a form of expression.

The analysis shows a clear pattern of how social and emotional communicational expressions are a part of the exclusion, especially in play entry negotiations. In all three examples, the children start the entry process in different ways – by either sitting a little bit away from the ongoing play, by doing the same thing as the children playing, or by physically trying to include themselves. All three also involved two children that are already playing when a third child tries to enter. The empirical material analysed includes both boys and girls, though girls were seen to exclude most actively in these examples. The passive resistance created via ignorance or neglection was met by Rebecca and Iris with emotion-accompanied resistance; they communicated this feeling verbally. Olle's reaction was facilitated by him getting the teacher to help and can be seen as a total misinterpretation of the situation followed by an emotional reaction of shame (Olle looking down at the sand). In all three examples, this was then followed by social exclusion in the form of either ignorance (Iris and Olle) or neglect (Rebecca). This exclusion was accompanied by emotions such as loneliness, sadness, arrogance, and superiority.

Exclusion was not initially identified as a particularly prevalent and recurring phenomenon in children's play negotiations during the observations. Within the bounds of exclusion, we very rarely captured verbal expressions such as, "you can't play with us," or non-verbal gestures such as physically pushing someone away.

Example 1 – You have to step back!

Three girls are sitting around a doll's house shaped like a castle (Figure 1). Sofie and Ida are arranging parts of the castle on opposite sides. Rebecca is sitting in the middle, slightly behind Sofie and Ida, observing the arranging.

FIGURE 1   Sofie (left), Rebecca (centre), and Ida (right) sit around the castle

> 00:30 – **Ida:** *Where will this one live?*
>
> 00:32 – **Sofie:** *Well, it can't live here…*
>
> 00:35 – **Ida:** *Now I know. Put the mirror there.* ((points at a place in the castle))
>
> 00:45 – **Ida:** *I'll put clothes on first.*
>
> 00:56 – ((Rebecca takes hold of a small doll's pram on the floor and starts to roll it))
>
> 00:59 – **Ida:** *Can I have it!* ((pulls the doll's pram out of Rebecca's hand))
>
> 01:05 – **Rebecca:** *But I'm not getting any use* (interpreted to mean she is not getting any benefits/is not permitted to do anything).
>
> 01:07 – **Sofie:** *Rebecca, you take a step back!* ((glares at Rebecca))
>
> *Silence*
>
> 01:13 – **Rebecca:** *But I've (got) to play!* ((stares sadly at the floor))
>
> *Silence*

Rebecca takes hold of a miniature doll's pram and starts rolling it (00:56). Ida notices Rebecca taking initiative and pulls the doll's pram away immediately (00:59). Rebecca (whose speech competence is weak), expresses dissatisfaction over not being permitted to touch the doll's pram and looks down at the castle sadly (01:05). Sofie turns around and glares at Rebecca while simultaneously indicating that there should be a boundary between Rebecca and the play space (01:07). Rebecca makes a new attempt to express dissatisfaction with the rejection and stares at the floor, looking frustrated (01:13). Sofie takes notice of the comment by looking at Rebecca but continues playing with her doll and does not answer her.

In the example, Rebecca uses a non-verbal gesture (rolling the miniature doll's pram toward the castle) in order to enter the play. Ida responds to the gesture by taking the pram from her, violating the implicit rules regarding involving others in play (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Curran, 1999), and abruptly sets limits on Rebecca's participation. Rebecca attempts to protest by expressing her frustration over the unfair treatment,

which shows a lack of following parts of the explicit rules as well (Curran, 1999). Rebecca is not ignored after her protest; she is instead subjected to neglect in that neither Sofie nor Ida show any kind of sympathy toward her concerning the unjust treatment (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 1999; Underwood, 2003); on the contrary, they urge her to remove herself from the play space: *'"You take a step back!"* (01:07). Rebecca makes a last attempt to join in, in spite of the instructions to stay out, and is then ignored and thereby completely excluded by Sofie and Ida, who then refrain from any kind of response (Fanger et al., 2012).

In this example, Rebecca is excluded through passive resistance in that her attempts to gain entry are not affirmed and that she receives no response to her statements regarding the treatment she receives or her wish to join in. Sofie and Ida both try to actively exclude Rebecca. From a distance, one could easily assume that Rebecca is allowed to be part of the play situation because no one pushes her away or explicitly states that she has to leave the play space.

In the second example, we examine a case of passive resistance, though there is a marked intention to exclude in which both whispering and lack of response are used. This action then morphs into actively and verbally trying to stop the child from participating.

Example 2 – We don't want Iris to play with us!

Alva and Maxine are sitting on the floor playing with building blocks. Iris comes up to Alva and Maxine, stands in front of them, and looks at them with her hands on her hips.

> 00:27 – **Iris:** *Can I play with you?* ((looks at Alva and Maxine))
>
> 00:34 – **Alva:** *( ) ( ) ( ).* ((whispers to Maxine))
>
> 00:37 – **Iris:** *But I want to build!*
>
> 00:39 – **Alva:** *( ) ( ) ( ).* ((whispers to Maxine))
>
> 00:41 – **Maxine:** ((Nods))
>
> 00:46 – **Iris:** *I know what you said! You're going away. But I'm coming too.*
>
> 00:54 – **Alva:** *( ) ( ) ( ).* ((says something inaudible to Iris with a cranky facial expression))
>
> 00:56 – **Iris:** *But I want to build with you.*
>
> 01:03 – **Alva:** *( ) ( ) ( ).* ((whispers to Maxine))
>
> 01:44 – **Maxine:** ((turns around and makes some kind of sign to Alva))
> 01:50 – ((Alva and Maxine crawl past Iris out to the big room))
>
> 01:59 – **Maxine:** *Linda (the teacher)… We don't want Iris to play with us!*
>
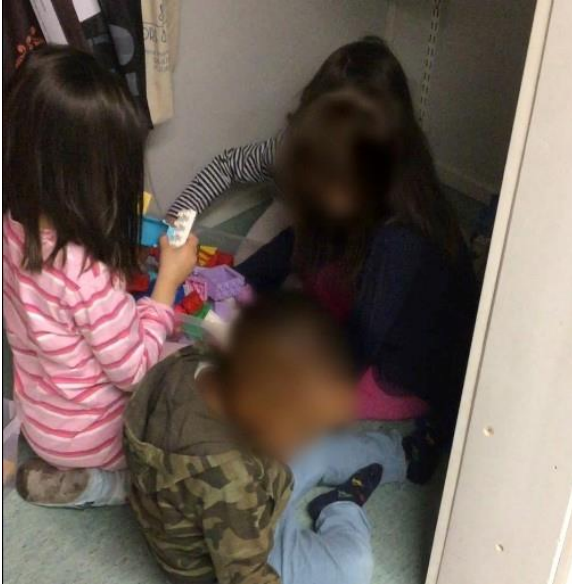> 02:01 – **Iris:** *But I want to join in.*

FIGURE 2   Alva (at the back of the corner) whispers to Maxine (next to Alva) in front of Iris (to the left)

Iris asks if she can join the play (00:27). Alva turns to Maxine and whispers in her ear (Figure 4). Iris sits down in front of them and clearly states that she wants to play too (00:37). Alva and Maxine continue to repeatedly whisper to each other in front of Iris. Iris starts to get impatient and asserts herself by pointing out that she is aware of their plan to remove themselves from the play (00:46). The whispering continues while Iris tries to join them in the play (00:56). Alva and Maxine finally leave the space, go up to the teacher, who is some distance away, and clearly state that they do not want to play with Iris (01:59).

In the beginning of the example (up until 00:54), Iris is subjected to exclusion in the form of ignoring; she is treated as if she does not exist (Höistad, 2005; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). Neither Alva nor Maxine show any interest in involving Iris despite her attempts, suggesting that the implicit rules of the play are not working (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Curran, 1999). Neither of them meet her gaze or respond to her comments; this happens repeatedly, placing her in an outcast (Underwood, 2003) position. The goal of exclusion is established clearly when Maxine and Alva go up to the teacher together (Fanger et al., 2012; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and express that they do not intend to include Iris (01:59).

In this example, the exclusion evolves from a more indirect form to verbal directness; in the third example, we see a situation in which the girls involve the teacher in their attempt to ignore their peer.

Example 3 – Maybe you could take Olle with you and play "catch and escape?"

Two girls (Ada and Roosa) and one boy (Olle) are gathered at a sandbox outside. Ada and Roosa are sitting in the sand talking to and playing with each other; Olle enters and picks up a scoop of sand. Olle returns to the girls, puts the scoop of sand down on the table next to them, and starts mixing it in the same way that the girls are mixing the sand on the ground. Roosa stands up on her knees and starts piling sand onto herself; observing this, Olle also starts to lightly pile sand onto Roosa. At this moment, Roosa reacts strongly by screaming; she goes directly to the teacher, telling her that Olle is throwing sand at them.

01:46 – **The teacher:** *Olle, you should not throw sand.* ((approaching Olle))

01:48 – **Ada:** *And he was also throwing at me.*

01:50 – **The teacher:** *Yes, look. They do not seem happy about that. Apologise.*

01:53 – **Olle:** *I'm sorry.* ((looks down in the sand))

01:55 – **The teacher:** *Good. Do not throw any more sand because that is not funny.*

02:00 – **Ada:** *Exactly.*

02:10 – **Olle:** *I got sand in my shoes.*

02:15 – **The teacher:** *Oh, well, that is not so nice. Maybe you could go find something else to play?*

02:23 – **Roosa:** *Hey! Let's play 'catch and escape'.*

02:26 – **The teacher:** *Maybe you could take Olle with you and play "catch and escape?"*

02:30 – **silence**

((Ada and Roosa look down in the sand, pretending they didn't hear, and continue shuffling around in the sand. Olle looks down toward the sand with a sad face))

FIGURE 3   The teacher (standing behind Olle) encourages the girls (Roosa to the left and Ada in the centre) to include Olle in the play.

In the example, Olle is attempting to enter the girls' play by carefully copying their actions. Neither Roosa nor Ada pay any attention to him before his sand hits Roosa's face; she then responds by telling the teacher. Neither of the girls speak to Olle either while the teacher scolds him (01:46, 01:55) or afterwards, even though he apologises to them (01:53). At the end of the sequence, the teacher first suggests that Olle find something else to play (02:15) while Roosa enthusiastically makes a suggestion (02:23). The teacher directly encourages Roosa and Ada to include Olle in the suggested play (02:26); this results in no play at all, even though Olle seems to be waiting to join "catch and escape" (02:30). Here, the teacher supports the play and intervenes in the play process. This example was included despite the teacher's participation since it clearly demonstrates how exclusion can occur even when a teacher participates.

In this example, Olle does not seek to gain access to the girls' play by talking to them. Instead, he attempts careful non-verbal moves, such as imitating their actions and waiting for them to respond. In this situation, the girls exert passive resistance by not speaking directly to or looking at Olle (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Höistad, 2005), even though it is clear that they are aware of his presence. Olle seems unsure about how best to approach the girls, and his attempts to make contact are not appreciated. At the end of the example, it becomes clear that their intention is to exclude Olle from play. This can be seen in Ada and Roosa's collective lack of response to his inclusion; they want to play "catch and escape", but show no intention of doing so when the teacher proposes that they include Olle (Fanger et al., 2012).

In all the examples, passive resistance was used repeatedly by more than one child in order to exclude another child from a play, even when teachers were present. Passive resistance consists of neglecting and ignoring behaviour that limits entry into the play space and keeps a child from playing with others. The three children (Rebecca, Iris, and Olle) were all treated as if they did not exist in spite of repeated verbal and/or non-verbal attempts to obtain permission to join the play. The first two examples differ in that Iris was subjected to whispering before her eyes while Rebecca experienced a play object and her place in the play space being taken away from her with no explanation as to why. In the third example, Olle was kept outside the play by the girls' refusal to communicate directly with him. Instead, the communication occurred through the teacher, who made it possible for Ada and Roosa to exert passive resistance.

Conclusions and discussion

The study was carried out in order to offer a better understanding of *children's communication and interactions in free play.* It also focuses on negotiation and exclusion,

with the research questions: *Which communicative recourses do children use in order to negotiate in play situations? How is exclusion carried out during play?*

The results of the study are based on the understanding that play is an arena in which communication and interaction occur on a daily basis and within which children's social and emotional competencies become visible (Howe & Leach, 2018). In play, children create peer cultures (Arnott, 2018; Bateman, 2011; Corsaro, 2000) that are built on social and emotional competencies that are expressed both verbally and non-verbally in play negotiation situations (Alvestad, 2010; Laursen & Adams, 2018; Wood, 2013). Further analysis of communication and interaction is required in order to better understand the dimensions of children's play as part of their execution of competencies in social settings with certain institutional rules. In this study, the interaction that was most evident in play negotiations involved conflict. Within this context, *exclusion of children in play* emerged as a recurring phenomenon (Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012).

All the exclusion situations were expressed through some form of limitation in participation in the social setting. In this article, this strategy is referred to *exclusion through passive resistance (ignoring or neglecting),* and it shows how children exclude other children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 1999; Underwood, 2003) when those other children try to join the play. Passive resistance occurs when the children either pretend that the others do not exist or pretend not to hear what they say (Höistad, 2005; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). This also happens when teachers are present.

The fact that children often exclude someone in their play negotiations became more apparent during the transcription process, which can be explained by the fact that exclusion tends to be camouflaged in different ways in different kinds of play (Tellgren, 2004). Children also have the ability to change communication strategies in their play negotiations (Alvestad, 2010). Camouflaging and strategy changes can, in turn, keep exclusion situations in free play from being noticed by the observer (Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). If these relatively hidden exclusion strategies are not identified and given attention, then early childhood education providers cannot offer the right kind of support for children regarding the handling of their emotions, so that they can master conflicts and negotiations in a constructive way. Additionally, individual exclusion processes create a ECEC setting where only a few children are fully included, which is in direct opposition to the goal of creating an ECEC education for all children. During our research process, we also reflected on the point at which social exclusion becomes bullying (Bullock, 2002; Höistad, 2005; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Kirves & Stoor-Grenner, 2010) and when social exclusion becomes about protecting the play (Alvestad, 2010; Corsaro, 2018; Tellgren, 2004). Therefore, a suggestion for further research would be to examine these two perspectives on social exclusion in parallel in order to define the difference more specifically.

This study has offered a few examples of how exclusion in play is part of children's social and emotional competencies. These are deeply connected to children's feelings of participation as well as their social identities, both of which are important elements of learning (cf. Heller et al., 2012; Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

This study focused on only eight ECEC centres; the results presented here would be strengthened if a similar study was done in a larger context with a larger group of children. In such a study, it would be interesting to deductically test the negotiation strategies suggested here. Research is also needed regarding what teachers can and should do when exclusion occurs.

Acknowledgments

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