

The Importance of Mutual Respect, Fairness, and Compassion in Educational Settings

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The Importance of Mutual Respect, Fairness, and Compassion in Educational Settings

Learning is a multifaceted undertaking involving teaching, guidance, support, scaffolding, and nurturance (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2006). In the past decade, there has been a shift in research on educational outcomes with a renewed focus on social relationships and the classroom climate for education. Societal attention to the cultural climate of education has likewise re-emerged within the context of global migration patterns, as well as the renewed focus on rising social inequalities and experiences of discrimination in childhood and adolescence (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). These concerns have prompted renewed support for efforts in both educational and developmental psychology to address how social interactions and relationships in classroom and educational environments bear on learning and development. The findings reveal that students' learning and development is significantly impacted by their social interactions and relationships in academic settings. Thus, educators and developmental psychologists have turned to understanding the social context of learning from childhood to adulthood.

In addition to teachers' strategies, new research has addressed how classroom and the dynamics in educational environments contribute to students' experiences of social exclusion, harassment, and discrimination, and how these experiences, in turn, place students at increased risk for reduced motivation, academic disengagement, and even dropping out of school (Benner et al., 2018; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Leaper & Brown, 2018). Relatedness in educational settings, on the other hand, has been shown to have positive effects on school engagement and achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; King, 2015), with implications for students' wellbeing and healthy social development.

How does this come about? What specific processes connect relationships and academic performance? The answers are complex and call for a range of research approaches that address both explicit and implicit processes as well as local and global norms, expectations, and policies. Beyond addressing perceived student deficits, a complete understanding of why social relations matter in educational settings requires a larger effort on the part of schools, universities, districts, teachers, and students to recognize what is necessary to change and improve the climate in educational settings.

This special issue of the *Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology* is focused on *Social Relations in Educational Settings: Why Social Exclusion and Relatedness Matter*. As researchers in the field of developmental and educational psychology, we view this topic, and research in this area, as a moral necessity. By moral necessity, we refer to the fact that relatedness is crucial for students' healthy development. Students who are not treated with respect, fairness, or compassion are at risk for short- and long-term negative consequences. These consequences include not only individual problems, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, but also group-level problems, such as dysfunctional classroom and educational environments. Providing students with educational experiences that reflect mutual respect, fair treatment, and compassion is necessary for all students to experience relatedness and to learn and grow together. In this introduction we aim to (1) highlight the importance of these topics, (2)

provide a brief context to frame current research in these areas, (3) highlight three themes demonstrated by the studies described in this special issue, and (4) offer three suggestions to encourage ongoing research in these areas.

The Current Issue

This special issue provides new and timely information for educational and developmental audiences. First, schools have always played a key role in fostering informed and engaged citizens. Today, students around the world are increasingly learning with peers who differ from them in culture, religion, and ethnicity (Verkuyten, 2014). This provides a valuable opportunity for students to develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively in the context of diverse friendships and collaborative learning. Unfortunately, it also provides a context for increased social exclusion and discrimination in these very same educational settings. The causes and consequences of these demographic shifts call for careful consideration of what inclusion means for students of diverse backgrounds.

Second, students around the world are currently experiencing a period of unprecedented educational disruption and isolation from teachers and peers, as countries manage the spread of the coronavirus pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). Over the next several years, researchers and educators will need to implement evidence-based programs and practices to enable students to re-engage with their curricula and the social world of their educational environment. Without a doubt, educators will need to directly address the feelings of belonging and relatedness in educational settings that form the foundation for learning. Given the remarkable opportunities and great challenges facing students today, a special issue on social relations in educational settings is especially timely and relevant.

Research Context

Students' experiences of both relatedness and exclusion in educational settings have many potential sources. There are at least three main areas of research on social relations in educational settings.

Student-teacher relationships. Research has shown that student-teacher relationships that are characterized by not only instructional support but also social support and trust are essential for student engagement and learning (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Wigfield et al., 2015). Throughout development, students need to feel that they belong and that their teachers value them as members of a learning community if they are to succeed. Students who perceive that their teachers care about and respect them report higher positive affect at school, greater academic motivation, and stronger performance (Alfaro et al., 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Zee et al., 2020).

Peer relationships. Research has shown that being accepted by peers at school or university has a significant impact on students' academic achievement. Students who are neglected (overlooked) by their peers are at higher risk for internalizing problems (e.g., loneliness, anxiety) while youth who are rejected –or in extreme cases, bullied– are at higher risk for both internalizing and externalizing (e.g., aggression) problems (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Rubin et al., 2009). These negative social-emotional outcomes are, in turn, associated with decreased

academic motivation, disengagement with school, and lower academic performance (Bellmore, 2011; Bierman, 2004).

Intergroup context of relationships. Research has examined the intergroup context of relationships in educational settings, with a focus on how group dynamics and norms can lead to social exclusion. Stereotypes and prejudice related to gender, ethnicity, and other social group memberships often emerge in childhood and can continue throughout the lifespan (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Rutland et al., 2010). In inter-group contexts, these attitudes can lead peers to tease and exclude others and teachers to overlook or discriminate against students based on group membership. Experiences of exclusion and discrimination, in turn, undermine students' sense of belonging, with negative consequences for their academic motivation and performance (Benner et al., 2018; Cheryan et al., 2017; Steele, 1997). Intervening to address inter-group social exclusion requires a focus on reducing stereotypes and prejudice in order to establish more inclusive academic environments (Killen et al., 2013).

Themes in this Special Issue

All three of these areas of research are represented by the innovative work in this special issue. Reflecting a range of educational contexts, the research presented here invites readers to think critically about the deeper questions of how and for whom social exclusion and relatedness matter, and points to the need for educational environments that promote inclusion, fairness, and compassion. Three general questions addressed in this special issue include: 1) How does relatedness with teachers foster learning?; 2) What circumstances call for a focus on peer inclusion and belonging in educational settings for promoting positive student emotional outcomes?; and 3) What mechanisms work to reduce exclusion of students from under-represented groups?

How does relatedness with teachers foster learning? Within this theme, Forster-Heinzer, Reichmuth, Höpfer, Rohr-Mentele, and Holtsch (2021) found that stronger teacher-student relationships fostered stronger intrinsic learning motivation among Swiss 16 year-olds enrolled in commercial apprenticeship training programs, even when their teachers changed frequently. While this study also revealed contributions for students' peer relationships, results highlighted the crucial roles that teachers play in strengthening students' positive attitudes and motivation for learning.

Given that student-teacher relationships play such an important role students' sense of belonging and inclusion, further research could examine what attitudes teachers hold that do not serve to create positive relationships. Recent research has shown that teachers' implicit biases can result in behaviors that discourage students from engaging in activities that do not fit societal expectations. As one example, girls often feel ignored or ostracized in math and science classes due to implicit and explicit assumptions that boys, not girls, excel at math and science (Leaper & Brown, 2018).

What circumstances call for a focus on peer inclusion and school belonging for promoting positive student emotional outcomes? Within this theme, two articles highlighted the importance of understanding peer inclusion and school belonging for learners who are

transitioning between schools or experiencing bullying. Schmidt, Dirk, and Schmiedek (2021) found that feeling included by peers predicted increases in general positive affect over the transition from primary to secondary school for German students classified as high-track, while feeling excluded by peers predicted increases in both general and school-related negative affect. Moreover, Marksteiner, Janson, and Beißert's (2021) analysis of PISA data from 15 year-olds in 49 countries revealed that feeling accepted, included, respected, and valued at school partially attenuated the detrimental effects of bullying on student wellbeing.

Together, these results highlight the importance of disentangling the effects of exclusion and inclusion on student learning and wellbeing. The absence of exclusion (i.e., not being rejected or bullied) is not the same as the presence of inclusion (i.e., feeling accepted and respected), nor do these experiences have perfectly complementary effects on wellbeing. Peer relationships clearly play a role in fostering an inclusive educational environment, from childhood through adulthood. Because students are both the recipients and perpetrators of negative social interactions in educational contexts, fostering positive peer relationships requires group-level analyses to determine what should change to create positive relationships.

What mechanisms work to reduce exclusion of students from under-represented groups? Within this theme, six articles –spanning the early school years through university– reported on the potential and importance of reducing experiences of exclusion for students from under-represented backgrounds. In particular, these articles focused on issues of immigration, generational status, and gender.

On a positive note, Scharenberg, Röhl, and Rollett (2021) found that 5th, 6th, and 7th graders in academically integrated schools had more extensive peer social networks when they were members of classrooms with greater student diversity by immigration history and socioeconomic status. However, the effects of environmental diversity may differ greatly as a function of age and context. For instance, Kunyu, Juang, Schachner, and Schwarzenthal (2021) found that a strong, positive heritage identity partially buffered the detrimental effects of discrimination on physiological stress, depression levels, and academic engagement among 7th graders of primarily second- and third-generation Turkish, Arab, and Eastern European descent living in Berlin. Surprisingly, however, the negative effects of discrimination on stress were higher among participants with high teacher relatedness, indicating a need to know more about how teachers respond to discrimination (i.e., acknowledging, intervening, or doing nothing).

At the university level, Wolf, Maurer, and Kunter (2021) found that immigrant students who planned to become teachers reported lower feelings of belonging and higher intentions to drop out relative to their native German peers. Moreover, Thies, Heise, and Bormann (2021) found that first-generation students may feel more left out on campus, with detrimental implications for their academic persistence. However, Yildirim, Zimmermann, and Jonkmann (2021) found that international students who felt like they were a part of the campus community reported a higher ability to balance their university work and lower likelihood of dropping out. Together, these findings highlight the need for intentional consideration of inclusion in post-secondary education.

Finally, Zander and Höhne (2021) examined the role of gender stereotypes, finding that women in computer science reported higher rates of perceived peer exclusion than women in education, and exclusion, in turn, suppressed students' likelihood of seeking help with coursework from peers. Interventions (in development by the authors) could target adaptive helping exchanges in the first year of these university programs in order to reduce harmful assumptions about gender and ability in STEM.

The Importance of Mutual Respect, Fair Treatment, and Compassion

The research in this volume convincingly makes the case that social exclusion and relatedness matter in educational settings. The studies reported here have many strengths, including many well-powered multi-level and longitudinal designs considering multiple aspects of relatedness and exclusion (e.g., peer, teacher, school, university), many multi-reporter measures (e.g., child, teacher), and several research questions directly addressing student diversity. In offering encouragement for ongoing research in this area, we draw on our perspectives as researchers studying social exclusion and social inequality in childhood and adolescence. Our primary aim is to encourage greater consideration of the *root causes* of experiences of relatedness or exclusion. That is, in light of the crucial roles that belonging and inclusion play in fostering social, emotional, and cognitive development, *why* do so many students, from kindergarten to university, experience so much exclusion? To address this question, we suggest: (1) an increased focus on inclusion and exclusion in inter-group contexts, (2) a more precise consideration of the systems that allow exclusion to persist, and (3) consideration of the optimal conditions for inter-group contact as a means of fostering mutual respect, fairness, and compassion.

Inclusion and exclusion in inter-group contexts. While much of the research on social exclusion from an inter-group approach has focused on categories such as gender and ethnicity, many inter-group contexts are overlooked in educational settings (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016). For instance, schools and classrooms where most students share the same nationality still often contain religious, socioeconomic, or linguistic diversity. Children hold stereotypes related to religion, social class, and accent or dialect from as early as primary school (Heiphetz et al., 2013; Imuta & Spence, 2020; Mistry et al., 2015). Divisions between these groups, too, creates conditions for social exclusion and discrimination.

Moreover, from kindergarten to university, students have multiple group identities (e.g., gender *and* ethnicity *and* sexual orientation), and research should continue to acknowledge and assess how students' intersecting identities influence how they are perceived and treated by their teachers and peers (Ghavami et al., 2016; Santos & Toomey, 2018). Likewise, the empirical evidence challenging binary concepts of gender and single-identity concepts of race highlights the importance of understanding, for example, how non-binary and multi-racial youth and adults navigate belonging and exclusion in educational settings (Gaither, 2015; Hyde et al., 2019).

Educational institutions and researchers alike should carefully consider the root causes of observed exclusion and rejection. Overlooking the potential role of stereotypes and prejudice (based on one or many inter-group factors) has risks. Researchers risk drawing incomplete or

misleading conclusions about the social processes at work in a given classroom or university (Killen et al., 2013). Schools and teachers risk implementing unhelpful or inadvertently harmful interventions that fail to address the root problems in their environments (Aboud & Brown, 2013). Students face the continued negative emotional and academic consequences of discrimination with no acknowledgement of its cause or support from institutional authorities (Benner et al., 2018).

Systemic change toward inclusion is necessary. Individual students, teachers, and administrators operate within larger systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). A student, for instance, is a member of their friend group, class, school or university, and city. Decisions, policies, and norms at any of these levels may affect learning and development directly or indirectly.

Schools, universities and researchers should actively consider how factors such as peer group norms, class curricula, social-emotional learning aims in academic environments, and city educational policies interact to influence relatedness, exclusion, and learning among students. For instance, factors that promote belonging in highly ethnically homogenous schools may not be equally predictive in highly ethnically diverse schools (Aboud & Brown, 2013; Benner & Graham, 2013). Likewise, classroom- or school-level programs to reduce exclusion or bullying may be undermined by peer group norms condoning these practices (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Killen et al., 2013). Assessing exclusion or relatedness at only one level misses a valuable opportunity to understand both barriers and supports to inclusion that students face.

Moreover, across all levels of inquiry, recognizing that students are part of broader educational systems calls for a much greater contextualization of the systems involved in a given study (Killen et al., 2016). A clear and complete description of the participant sample and its relation to the rest of the student body in terms of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other relevant group backgrounds is a crucial place to start.

Fostering mutual respect, fairness, and compassion. Finally, now that we know more about how and for whom exclusion and relatedness matter, what can we do to promote more mutual respect, fairness, and compassion in educational settings? One approach that has received considerable empirical support involves the optimal conditions for inter-group contact. Because schools and universities often bring together students of different group backgrounds, they offer many opportunities to put these conditions in place (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014; Turner & Cameron, 2016).

First outlined by Allport (1954), the optimal conditions for inter-group contact involve small groups of individuals from different, equal status group backgrounds cooperating to achieve a shared goal with the support of relevant authority figures (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). For instance, at the primary school level, this may involve small groups of students from different backgrounds cooperating on projects under a teachers' supervision. As another example, at the university level, this may involve small groups of students from different backgrounds investigating a new topic together and reporting the results to their instructor and the rest of the class. Small group cooperative learning experiences result in higher student

achievement relative to more competitive learning contexts (Roseth et al., 2008). Optimally, these experiences also help to reduce stereotypes and form the foundation for cross-group friendships (Davies et al., 2011).

There are challenges to facilitating the optimal conditions for inter-group contact in educational settings, including systems that create group (e.g., gender) segregation between schools, procedures that create group (e.g., ethnic) segregation within even the most diverse schools, and students' own pre-existing prejudice and anxiety about cross-group interactions (Graham & Echols, 2018; Pahlke et al., 2014; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). Nevertheless, carefully implemented inter-group contact experiences can be effective at reducing prejudice and encouraging friendships among students of diverse backgrounds (Rutland & Killen, 2015; Turner & Cameron, 2016).

In closing, we emphasize again the important role of research on social relations in educational settings. This special issue provides timely and important information that researchers and educators alike can use to strengthen teacher-student and peer relationships, particularly for students from under-represented immigration, generational, and gender backgrounds, students experiencing transitional or peer difficulties, and students in non-traditional educational circumstances. Social exclusion and relatedness matter. Through continued consideration of multiple inter-group contexts, nested educational systems, and the opportunities that schools and universities offer to reduce biases, researchers and educators can foster the mutual respect, fair treatment, and compassion that is necessary for all students to learn and grow together.

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