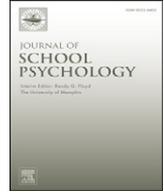




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# Teacher practices as predictors of children's classroom social preference<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Students who do not get along with their peers are at elevated risk for academic disengagement and school failure. Research has predominantly focused on factors within such children that contribute to their peer problems. This study considers whether teacher practices also predict social preference for children in that classroom. Participants were 26 elementary school teachers and 490 students in their classrooms followed for one school year. Results suggested that teachers who favored the most academically talented students in the fall had classrooms where children had lower average social preference in the spring after statistical control of children's fall social preference and externalizing behavior problems. Teachers who demonstrated emotionally supportive relationships with students in the fall had classrooms where children had greater possibility of changing their social preference from fall to spring. Although children with high externalizing behaviors tended to experience declining social preference over the course of the school year, teachers' learner-centered practices attenuated this progression. However, teachers' favoring of the most academically talented accentuated the negative relation between externalizing behaviors and social preference. Implications for school psychology practitioners are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Elementary school students who cannot get along with their peers are relevant to educators because these social problems can interfere with the learning environment for the entire classroom (Stormont, 2001). Furthermore, children with peer problems are at elevated risk for subsequent academic disengagement, school failure, and dropout, even after statistical control of the original levels of achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Collectively, findings underscore the educational importance of children's peer relationships.

Existing research has predominantly focused on the individual characteristics of youth with peer problems that contribute to their ostracism, such as these children's poor behaviors (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). While acknowledging the veracity of this perspective, we propose that social contextual influences on peer problems have been understudied (Mikami, Lerner, & Lun, 2010). This article examines the possibility that elementary school teachers' instructional practices and patterns of interaction with students may be associated with (a) the overall levels of social preference (a measure of the proportion of peers who like the child, minus the proportion of peers who dislike the child) in the classroom; (b) the change versus stability of children's social preference over the course of the school year; and (c) the extent to which children with externalizing behavior problems show declining social preference.

We note that the traditional method used to assess social preference has limited the investigation of teacher influences on this construct. Sociometric nominations, in which children name the peers whom they like and dislike, are the gold standard to assess social preference and are considered superior to reports from parents or teachers (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Parker & Asher, 1987). Social preference is determined by subtracting the proportion of disliked nominations from the proportion of liked nominations a child receives. However, in the traditional model proposed by Coie et al. (1982), children nominate exactly three peers whom they like and three whom they dislike, and social preference scores are standardized within each group of peers providing nominations.

This model has been influential, such that many researchers have subsequently either constrained the number of nominations children may provide, standardized nominations within classrooms, or both (e.g., Cillessen & Bellmore, 1999; DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990; Dodge et al., 2003; Hoza et al., 2005; Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). Crucially, these practices restrict the possibility that some classrooms could have higher average social preference than others, potentially owing to differences in teacher behaviors. More recently, researchers interested in social contextual influences on peer relationships have begun to depart from this tradition (e.g., Chang, 2004; Donohue, Perry, & Weinstein, 2003), and the current study is aligned with these directions. In sum, the historical methodology of sociometric nominations has limited investigation into variability in social preference across classrooms as well as teachers' influence on this variability. Research about contextual effects is scarce in comparison with the vast literature about child internal characteristics that influence social preference.

### 1.1. Teacher practices and children's social preference

Teachers may affect the overall level of social preference in their classroom because elementary school children's evaluations of their peers may be based, in part, on their observations of the teacher's reactions to these students. When teachers demonstrate that they value a child, their behaviors may set an example for peers to follow. Using a design where children in kindergarten through second grade viewed a videotaped classroom scene, White and Kistner (1992) and White, Jones, and Sherman (1998) experimentally manipulated teacher responses to a target student in the video whose behavior was consistent across conditions. Results revealed that children were influenced by the teacher's responses in the video, liking the target child more when the teacher expressed positivity relative to when the teacher made derogatory statements toward that child.

A cross-sectional study of third and fourth graders found that peers' perceptions of a teacher's relationship quality with a student was correlated with that student's social preference after statistical control of problem behavior (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001). In short-term longitudinal designs, teacher reports of the positive quality of the teacher–student relationship (Hughes & Kwok, 2006) and of personal liking for the student (Taylor, 1989) predicted elementary school children's subsequent gains in social

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