



# Competitive classroom norms and exclusion of children with academic and behavior difficulties☆



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## ABSTRACT

We investigated effects of classroom-level norms and individual competitive attitudes on children's exclusion of hypothetical peers with behavior or academic difficulties. Upper elementary school children ( $N = 1009$ ) from Switzerland were presented with four scenarios about social exclusion at two time points (fifth and sixth grade). These scenarios varied according to difficulty type of exclusion target (low-achieving vs. hyperactive) and context of exclusion (academic vs. social). Multilevel analyses revealed that children were more likely to exclude hypothetical hyperactive peers than low-achieving peers for reasons of effective group functioning. When children transferred to the sixth grade, they became more likely to coordinate the type of difficulty of the exclusion target with the context of exclusion. Moreover, competitive classroom-level norms and individual attitudes positively predicted the exclusion of low-achieving children. To improve social inclusion, teachers can encourage learning environments, where children learn to integrate effective academic group functioning with fairness principles.

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## 1. Introduction

Children with low academic achievement or behavior problems frequently experience social exclusion by their peers. Research indicates that compared to typically developing children, both academic and behavior problems are associated with social rejection and being involved in bullying or victimization (e.g., Estell et al., 2008; Hoza et al., 2005; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In order to promote inclusion of children with low academic achievement or behavior problems, it is important not only to focus on the *excluded children* but also to develop an understanding of the perspective of *excluding children* and how they balance concerns about fairness and welfare with concerns about peer group functioning. How do children understand social exclusion of peers with academic or behavior problems? What are children's decisions in hypothetical peer exclusion contexts and which concerns do they prioritize? Is it more important that students with academic and behavior difficulties are treated fairly or that the group can achieve its goals?

In this two-wave study (T1: fifth grade, T2: sixth grade), we investigated upper elementary grade students' exclusion decisions and justifications in hypothetical scenarios, which described low-achieving and hyperactive students. The upper elementary grades may represent a challenging developmental phase in countries like Switzerland whose

secondary school systems distinguish between several performance levels. During the upper elementary grades, children are selected and streamed according to their grades; thus, students are under growing pressure to perform. This increasing pressure may have negative implications for the social inclusion of children who do not conform to academic and behavioral norms at school (Wettstein, Ramseier, & Scherzinger, 2016).

To improve educational practices for social inclusion it is further important to investigate how social-contextual factors such as classroom norms contribute to children's thinking and reasoning about social exclusion. Therefore, we also explored how classroom-level competitive norms contributed to children's exclusion decisions and their social reasoning, above and beyond children's individual competitive attitudes. To our knowledge, this is the first study including longitudinal data as well as social-contextual measures to investigate how competitive classroom norms and individual attitudes are related to children's exclusion decisions.

### 1.1. Decision making and social reasoning about social exclusion

The present study was guided by the social reasoning developmental (SRD) perspective (Killen, Elenbaas, & Rutland, 2015; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Rutland & Killen, 2015) that aims to integrate social domain theory (Turiel, 1998) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the social identity theory, children seek to identify with social groups and define themselves by their group-membership; therefore, they view their groups as more positive than other social groups,

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which can lead to in-group bias. In-group bias serves important functions such as supporting children's self-worth and contributing to children's identity development. However, in-group bias also implies that children expect group members to conform to group norms which might result in unfair exclusion of individuals who do not fit group criteria. According to social domain theory, children and adolescents not only use group-based considerations, but also refer to moral criteria when reasoning about peer group exclusion. Therefore, children's developing understanding about fairness enable them to coordinate moral concerns with group concerns and to critically evaluate exclusionary group norms from a moral point of view. In sum, one important goal of the SRD perspective is to investigate how children and adolescents weigh *moral concerns* about fairness with *group concerns*.

Research from the SRD perspective revealed that children's weighting of moral and group concerns depends on the specific characteristics of the context in which social exclusion takes place (Killen & Rutland, 2011). First, children are more likely to accept hypothetical exclusion in forced-choice contexts than in straightforward contexts. Forced-choice contexts require children to choose to include either an in-group or an out-group member. In contrast, straightforward contexts require children to choose between including or not including an out-group member. As the forced-choice context necessitates the exclusion of a peer and the straightforward context does not, the former entails greater ambiguity (Brenick & Killen, 2014; Gasser, Malti, & Buholzer, 2014; Theimer, Killen, & Stangor, 2001). Second, hypothetical exclusion based on concerns about group functioning is most likely to occur when the inclusion of the out-group child would negatively affect the attainment of peer group goals (e.g., the group would not be able to solve a difficult math task if a child with academic difficulties joined the group). In contrast, children prioritize moral concerns over concerns about group functioning if the inclusion of the out-group child does not conflict with effective group functioning (Killen & Stangor, 2001; Richardson, Hitti, Mulvey, & Killen, 2014).

Besides the situational context in which social exclusion takes place, age differences play an important role in children's thinking about social exclusion. With age children become increasingly sensitive to situational issues and are more competent in coordinating multiple considerations in their reasoning about peer group exclusion (Killen & Stangor, 2001; Richardson, Mulvey, & Killen, 2012). For example, in a study by Gasser et al. (2014) 6-, 9-, and 12-year-old children were asked to predict exclusion of hypothetical children with disabilities in situations which varied according to the disability type of the exclusion target (mental vs. physical disability) and the type of group activity (academic, social, athletic). Results revealed that older children were more likely than younger children to consider group functioning in situations where inclusion of the child with the disability would negatively impact effective group functioning (e.g., inclusion of a child with mental disability into an academic group activity). These findings suggest an increasing understanding in older children that effective group functioning represents an essential condition that groups can achieve their group goals and interests.

### 1.2. Social exclusion based on academic and behavior difficulties

To date few, if any, studies investigated children's reasoning about exclusion of peers with *low academic achievement* and of peers with *hyperactive behavior*. Both children with academic and children with behavior problems frequently experience social rejection (e.g., Hoza et al., 2005; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Recent research focuses on how the social context affects these children's victimization and rejection experiences, highlighting the role of stereotypes and peer group norms (Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000; Hoza, 2007; Mikami, Lerner, & Lun, 2010). From this perspective, it is important to deepen an understanding of how children think and reason about social exclusion of children with behavior or academic difficulties.

A study by Richardson et al. (2014) investigated adolescents' moral judgments about exclusion of hypothetical peers with aggressive behavior and with low soccer ability. The study showed that adolescents were more likely to accept exclusion from a soccer club if the hypothetical exclusion target was described as aggressive compared to when it was described as having low soccer ability (Richardson et al., 2014). In addition, hypothetical exclusion of a peer with low athletic competence varied as a function of the competitiveness of the soccer club (i.e., more exclusion in competitive than non-competitive clubs), whereas exclusion of an aggressive peer did not depend on the context of exclusion. These findings suggest that children view aggression as highly aversive and thus expect exclusion of these children independently of the peer group context. In contrast, children's exclusion of a bad soccer player is only legitimate in contexts where inclusion would conflict with effective group functioning. Even though these target groups differ from ours, there are important conceptual similarities: Aggression as well as hyperactive behavior are socially aversive behaviors and both low soccer ability and low achievement focus on specific competence deficits. Our study builds on this research by focusing on exclusion of students with hyperactive behavior and low academic achievement. We further extend this study by investigating how classroom-level norms contribute to children's exclusion decisions.

### 1.3. Competitive classroom norms and competitive individual attitudes

Recent research highlights the role of group norms in children's social competencies and relationships (e.g., Chen, Chang, Liu, & He, 2008; Gasser & Malti, 2012; Mikami et al., 2010; Nipedal, Nesdale, & Killen, 2010). During middle childhood children increasingly attend to group norms and as a consequence, peer groups exert growing influence on children's social interactions (e.g., Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). Group norms can be defined as the group members' shared expectations about attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that group members should display (Nipedal et al., 2010). Several studies support the assumption that classroom or school norms affect children's behavior socialization (e.g., Henry et al., 2000). For example, Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) related individual attitudes towards bullying and students' expectations of social sanctions of bullying in the classroom (classroom norms) to their individual bullying behavior and found that classroom norms predicted unique variance in bullying behavior, after controlling for individual attitudes. Moreover, research on children's intergroup attitudes revealed that inclusive school norms have positive effects on children's out-group attitudes (Nesdale & Lawson, 2011), especially in contexts where peer groups hold exclusionary norms (McGuire, Rutland, & Nesdale, 2015).

To date, there has been little research to investigate how classroom norms affect children's hypothetical exclusion decisions and reasoning about social exclusion. The present study investigated how competitive norms at the classroom level relate to children's exclusion decisions. We focused on competitive classroom norms because competitive classroom norms may enhance the salience of effective group functioning and relate to higher exclusionary behavior among children. We assessed competitive norms according to the social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), in which individuals coordinate actions in order to achieve their goals in either positive (cooperative) or negative (competitive) ways. Cooperation exists when the actions of individuals support the attainment of joint goals. In contrast, competition exists when the actions of individuals impede the attainment of each other's goals. Cooperation and competition can be conceptualized as contextual, relational or individual variables (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). As contextual variables they represent norms that are made salient in the school or classroom setting which might influence children's inclusion and exclusion decisions. Research revealed that cooperative compared to competitive goal structures have a positive effect on various social outcomes, such as more advanced moral reasoning (Tichy,

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