



The role of cross-group friendship and emotions in adolescents' attitudes towards inclusion



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ABSTRACT

Background: Most countries have started to educate students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, but it remains unclear how inclusive attitudes towards students with SEN can be promoted.

Aims: This study investigated the role of adolescents' friendships and socio-moral competencies for their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN. Specifically, we studied whether adolescents without SEN would develop more inclusive attitudes if they had close friendships with SEN students and if they expressed negative emotions about social exclusion.

Methods: Adolescents' inclusive attitudes and their emotions were gathered from survey data of 1225 Swiss students aged 11–13. Social network data were collected to assess adolescents' friendship relationships.

Results: The results indicated that adolescents' friendship closeness with SEN students positively related to their inclusive attitudes. However, this was only true for adolescents who anticipated more negative than positive emotions if a student with SEN was excluded.

Implications: These findings highlight the role of friendship relationships between adolescents with and without SEN and adolescents' socio-moral experiences for their attitudes towards the inclusion of peers with SEN. Thus, inclusive education may benefit from promoting friendships among students with and without SEN as well as adolescents' socio-moral competencies.

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What this paper adds

Students with SEN are often targets of social exclusion in inclusive classrooms. In order to gain an understanding of how social exclusion may be prevented, it is important to study adolescents' attitudes towards including peers with SEN. Furthermore, adolescents' emotions following the exclusion of a student with SEN reflect their socio-moral experiences and highlight how they consider aspects of fairness and aspects of group functioning when deciding whom to include in peer activities.

Prior research has revealed strong evidence in favor of intergroup contacts (i.e. contacts between children from different social groups) and highlighted the role of cross-group friendships. However, most of this research has been done with

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students from different ethnicities. Little is known whether friendships between students with and without SEN relate to adolescents' inclusive attitudes.

This study adds to the previous literature in demonstrating that close friendships between students with and without SEN may go along with more inclusive attitudes in students without SEN. However, such positive consequences depend on adolescents' socio-moral competencies: If adolescents experience positive emotions (e.g., pride) when a student with SEN is excluded, they may not express inclusive attitudes, even if they have close friends with SEN. In other words, our findings suggest that inclusive attitudes not only depend on adolescents' friendships, but also on their individual socio-moral competencies.

1. Introduction

During early adolescence, peer group attitudes and peer conformity are highly salient (Adler & Adler, 1998). This strong need for group affiliation may enhance the social exclusion of minority group members because adolescents may conform to exclusive peer group norms (Killen & Rutland, 2011). To prevent social exclusion, prior research has highlighted the role of intergroup contact between students from different social groups (e.g., Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Specifically, cross-group friendships may be associated with the strongest positive effects on intergroup attitudes, as friendships represent high-quality contacts (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Although the evidence regarding intergroup contact and its positive consequences on intergroup attitudes is well documented (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), it remains unclear whether individuals with higher levels of intergroup contact also express more positive attitudes towards including minority group members into social activities (Bastian, Lusher, & Ata, 2012).

Beside cross-group friendship, students' inclusive attitudes may also depend on adolescents' emotions following the exclusion of a minority group member. These emotions represent aspects of adolescents' socio-moral experiences during intergroup conflict and highlight which aspects of a given situation are important to them (e.g., conventional concerns, such as peer group functioning vs. moral norms, such as fairness considerations) (Killen & Malti, 2015). Although prior studies have examined adolescents' emotions about social exclusion (e.g., Malti, Killen, & Gasser, 2012), scholars have not yet considered how individual differences in these emotions relate to adolescents' inclusive attitudes.

We addressed these two research gaps by first, examining whether adolescents with cross-group friends would be more positive towards including hypothetical minority group members into social activities. Second, we studied if individuals who reported negative emotions (e.g., feeling sad) when a hypothetical minority group member was excluded would have more inclusive attitudes.

We investigated cross-group friendships between majority group students without special educational needs (SEN) and minority group students with SEN. SEN refer to students with academic difficulties who need additional assistance to visit the same grade as their typically developing peers (Powell, 2006). In the Swiss education system, where this study was conducted, the term SEN is reserved for students who receive additional assistance from a teacher with particular skills in dealing with SEN. This additional support is based on comprehensive interdisciplinary assessments of students' capacities relative to their age group. Therefore, students with SEN must have a lower academic achievement in comparison with their classmates.

As most countries have started to educate students with SEN in mainstream schools (Powell, 2006), professionals working in education need to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that underlie the exclusion of students with SEN.

1.1. Social exclusion of students with SEN

Previous research on peer relationships of students with SEN in inclusive classrooms suggests that they are perceived as less popular and are less included in peer groups compared to students without SEN (e.g., Estell et al., 2008; Grütter, Meyer, & Glenz, 2015). In order to prevent the exclusion of students with SEN, researchers have highlighted the importance of inclusive attitudes of students without SEN (Bates, McCafferty, Quayle, & McKenzie, 2015). Therefore, scholars have studied typically developing adolescents' social contacts with SEN students. Findings from these studies have been mixed: While some studies found that these contacts relate to more positive attitudes in students without SEN (e.g., Armstrong, Morris, Abraham, Ukoumunne, & Tarrant, 2016; Grütter & Meyer, 2014; Laws & Kelly, 2005; Maras & Brown, 1996), other studies have not found any significant differences between individuals who had contacts with SEN peers and individuals without such contacts (e.g., Hastings & Graham, 1995; Nabors, 1997). This inconsistent evidence does not allow for any clear conclusions regarding the effects of inclusive schooling on the attitudes of adolescents without SEN.

Prior studies have also investigated adolescents' intended behavior to interact with hypothetical SEN students, showing that stories about friendships between students with and without students having SEN led to an increased desire to interact with SEN children (e.g. Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007). We extended these studies and compared adolescents' intended behavior to include hypothetical students *with* SEN with their intended behavior to include hypothetical students *without* SEN. The reason for this comparison is based on the idea that social exclusion often results from a process of in-group preference (Abrams & Killen, 2014). Accordingly, individuals enhance their social identities by ascribing their in-group (i.e., the social group they belong to) more positive attributes compared to out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result of this comparison, out-group members may become excluded (Abrams & Killen, 2014). Therefore, information about both – attitudes regarding the inclusion of in-group members (i.e. students without SEN) as well as

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