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Effects of the structure of classmates' perceptions of peers' academic abilities on children's perceived cognitive competence, peer acceptance, and engagement ☆

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of classroom indegree for ability (the degree to which peer nominations as academically capable show high consensus and focus on a relatively few number of children in a classroom) on first grade children's peer acceptance, teacher-rated classroom engagement, and self-perceived cognitive competence. Participants were 291 children located in 84 classrooms. Participating in sociometric interviews were 937 classmates. Consistent with social comparison theory, classroom indegree moderated the associations between children's achievement and classroom engagement and peer liking. Children with lower ability, relative to their classmates, were less accepted by peers and less engaged in classrooms in which students' perceptions of classmates' abilities converged on a relatively few number of students than in classrooms in which peers' perceptions were more dispersed. High indegree was associated with lower self-perceived cognitive competence regardless of ability level.
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Keywords: Peer perceptions; Sociometric assessment; Academic ability; Elementary students; Classroom context; Peer acceptance; School engagement; Perceived cognitive competence; Social comparison theory; Differential teacher behavior

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1. Introduction

Considerable research conducted over three decades has documented the impact of teacher practices that highlight differences in children's relative abilities on children's achievement, motivation, and self-views (Ames, 1992; Brophy, 1983; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Mac Iver, 1987; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Urdan & Midgley, 2003; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp, & Botkin, 1987). This body of evidence is drawn from research on teacher expectancy effects (for review see Jussim & Harber, 2005), classroom goal structure (for review see Urdan & Midgley, 2003), classroom task structures (Simpson & Rosenholtz, 1986), and teacher frame of reference (Marsh & Craven, 2002). The literature from these separate but overlapping traditions has identified teacher practices that are associated with the self-fulfilling prophesy effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) and with students' academic motivation and perceived competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988;Lüdtke, Köller, Marsh, & Trautwein, 2005; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). These practices, collectively referred to in the teacher expectancy literature as high-differentiating practices, include providing more emotional support, choice, praise, response opportunities, and special privileges to high achievers and more criticism and direction to low achievers; frequent classroom reminders of the importance of not making mistakes and of earning good grades; more frequent and more public performance feedback (Brophy, 1983; Jussim, 1986; Mac Iver, 1988; Weinstein et al., 1987), and grading in reference to comparison with others rather than in relation to personal improvement (Marsh & Craven, 2002).

1.1. Implications of teacher differentiating practices for student motivation and perceived cognitive competence

One method of identifying high differentiating classrooms involves asking students to describe their teacher's likely interactions with hypothetical high and low ability students (Weinstein et al., 1987). In those classrooms in which students perceive more differentiating teacher treatment to high and low ability students, teacher expectancy effects are larger and students' self-perceptions more closely match those of the teacher (Brattesani, Weinstein, & Marshall, 1984; Weinstein et al., 1987).

One might question the age at which children are capable of reporting accurately about teacher practices in the classroom or about their own or other students' abilities. When interviewed individually with items that are concretely worded, children as young as 4 years of age provide reliable and meaningful information about teachers' behaviors toward them (Montzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003). Children as young as first grade are aware of teacher differential behavior to high and low ability students (Weinstein et al., 1987), and their rankings of classmates' relative abilities align with teacher ratings (Stipek, 1981; Stipek & Tannatt, 1984). Weinstein et al. (1987) investigated developmental shifts between first and fifth grade in students' awareness of differential teacher behavior. Although first graders were as accurate as third and fifth graders in detecting patterns of differential teacher behavior to high and low achieving students, when they described their own interactions with the teacher, both first and third graders were less likely than fifth graders so see differences in their own treatment as a function of teacher expectations, or to be as accurate about the relative level of their teachers' expectations for them. The researchers interpreted this finding to mean that first graders may apply knowledge of differential teacher behavior to others before they apply this knowledge to themselves.

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