



Teacher attunement: Supporting early elementary students' social integration and status



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the longitudinal association between teachers' broad attunement to students' peer group memberships and students' social centrality and status in early elementary classrooms in a sample of 276 first – third graders and 20 teachers. We further examined the value added when considering teachers' precise attunement to students' individual peer group affiliates. Social cognitive mapping (SCM) procedures were used to generate and compare students' and teachers' reports of peer groups to assess teacher attunement and students' centrality; peer nominations assessed students' social preference and popularity. Results indicated early elementary teachers' attunement is limited. Findings substantiated the value in distinguishing between teachers' broad and precise attunement, indicating that teachers' broad attunement to peer group memberships is important for popularity, whereas precise attunement to individual students' affiliates matters for centrality. Implications for the contribution of teacher attunement to students' centrality and status are discussed in relation to teachers' invisible hand.

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In classrooms, children establish a peer ecology that is defined by the interactional and affiliative patterns, and socialization processes that take place among students over time (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Although children create their own classroom peer ecologies (Adler & Adler, 1995; Corsaro & Eder, 1990), teachers have been theorized to guide students toward successful experiences within the classroom peer ecology (Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011). A prerequisite for this guidance may be an accurate understanding of aspects of the classroom peer ecology (Rodkin & Gest, 2010; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). *Teacher attunement* reflects the extent to which teachers agree with students' perspectives on relationships within the peer ecology (Hamm & Hoffman, *In press*). In the present study, we distinguish between two types of attunement: a broad attunement to the membership of peer groups identified by students in the classroom, and a more precise attunement to the specific peer group affiliates of individual students, and examine the extent to which both types of attunement contribute to early elementary students' centrality, social preference, and popularity within the classroom.

Classroom peer ecologies and student adjustment

Classroom peer ecologies have two primary relational systems: a system of peer groups, which represent the informal groups of children

who regularly and voluntarily interact with one another (Cairns & Cairns, 1994), and a social status system that reflects individual students' social standing within the larger classroom of students (Rodkin & Ryan, 2012). Specific relationships within these classroom peer ecology systems are foundational to students' school success. As a marker of social integration, centrality reflects the extent to which students are known by and have social ties to their classmates within the peer group system. Students who experience centrality tend to experience more positive features of their classroom-based peer relationships (Vu & Locke, 2014) and exhibit fewer externalizing behaviors (Witvliet, van Lier, Cuijper, & Koot, 2010). Within the social status hierarchy of the classroom, social preference, also known as peer acceptance, reflects the extent to which students are liked by classmates (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Students who experience social preference are more behaviorally engaged, prosocial, and cooperative (Bierman, 2004; Ladd, 2005). Popularity, a distinct role within the social status system, reflects students' visibility and prestige with peers (Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002) and is a marker of students' sociability (Gest, Sesma, Masten, & Tellegen, 2006). Although students who experience social preference and popularity tend to engage in more socially competent interactions with peers (Gest et al., 2006), studies suggest they are distinct constructs that are associated with divergent outcomes over the course of elementary school (Lease et al., 2002). Xie, Li, Boucher, Hutchins, and Cairns (2006) suggest social preference and popularity begin to diverge sometime between the 2nd and 4th grade. That is, who children like or with

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whom they prefer to play become less important to who students nominate as popular by the 4th grade.

Broad and precise attunement to peer group affiliations

Although teachers may be attuned to numerous relationships within the classroom peer ecology, a number of researchers have investigated teachers' attunement to the peer group system of their classrooms. Studies of elementary and middle school teachers suggest that, on average, teachers accurately identify approximately 40% of the membership of peer groups identified by students, and that this attunement improves as the school year progresses (Gest, 2006; Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2011; Pearl, Leung, Van Acker, Farmer, & Rodkin, 2007). Early elementary teachers appear to be less attuned to membership of classroom peer groups than teachers of later elementary grades. Gest (2006) reported that first-grade teachers could accurately identify approximately 26% of the members of their classroom's peer groups, whereas third- and fifth-grade teachers could identify, on average, 55% of peer group members.

This type of attunement is broad in nature, reflecting teachers' accuracy in identifying affiliative patterns among students in the class as a whole, but not necessarily individual students' experiences within the peer group system of the classroom peer ecology. That is, this broad attunement reflects teachers' accuracy in naming the members of peer groups that have been identified by students. In the absence of complete attunement to the membership of a peer group, teachers are misidentifying the peer group affiliates of individual students in the class. The extent to which teachers maintain a precise attunement to the peer group affiliations of individual students in their classroom is not yet known, but given that their broad attunement to peer group memberships tends to be modest, it is likely that a more precise attunement to the peer group affiliates of individual students is comparatively low. A first aim of the present study is to document early elementary school teachers' broad and precise attunement to students' peer group affiliations at the beginning and end of the school year. A distinction between teachers' broader attunement to peer group affiliation and their precise attunement to individual students' affiliates is potentially valuable to identify, as broad and precise attunement may differentially promote students' experiences within the peer ecology.

Teacher attunement and students' centrality and social status in the peer ecology

Skinner and Belmont (1993) highlighted teachers' attunement to their students as a dimension of teacher involvement that promotes successful school adjustment. The potential for teachers' attunement to aspects of students' peer relationships to benefit students' social adjustment, specifically, is conceptualized by the "invisible hand" metaphor (Farmer et al., 2011, p. 267), which reflects the idea that in the course of everyday classroom activities and routines, teachers manage classroom social dynamics in ways that support students' peer relationships. Teachers draw on classroom social dynamics to teach academic content, and as they make decisions about seating charts and student grouping assignments that affect student interaction patterns around learning (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Teachers establish expectations for students' social interactions and create an environment that helps students adopt and internalize prosocial dispositions. Moreover, teachers help students establish productive roles in the classroom that benefit aspects of students' social standing, such as social preference and popularity, over the course of the school year (Chang, 2003; Chang et al., 2007; Farmer et al., 2011; Wentzel, 2002). Attunement to their students' peer relationships, such as peer group affiliations, early in the school year has been conceptualized as a foundation of teachers' capacity to guide the peer ecology in ways that support students' social integration and status across the school year (Rodkin & Gest, 2010).

Results of several studies underscore the potential for teacher attunement to the peer group system to benefit students' experiences within the peer ecology. Direct study is limited to a single study of the contributions of teachers' broad attunement to peer group affiliations to students' perceptions of aspects of the peer ecology. In this study, sixth-graders reported a more favorable sense of school belonging, and perceived that their classmates were less supportive of bullying at the end of the school year, when they were in peer groups to which teachers were more attuned (Hamm et al., 2011). Given that the study addressed teachers' broad attunement, even if teachers maintained a reasonable level of attunement to the members of peer groups identified by students, they typically misidentified the affiliations of individual students. Yet, students benefited from being in a peer group more fully known by their teacher, even if the teacher did not accurately place them, individually, in the peer group. Teachers' broad attunement to the peer group memberships within the classroom peer ecology has been linked only to students' perceptions of aspects of the peer ecology, not to their relationships within either the peer group system or social status system of the classroom peer ecology.

Evidence from elementary school classrooms suggests that a precise attunement to peer group affiliations of individual students has the potential to promote aspects of students' relationships in classrooms. Kindermann (2011) described how an elementary school teacher sought to re-integrate a student whose peer group membership had become tenuous. The teacher collected sociometric data about students' liking and disliking of classmates to inform grouping practices and seating charts, and applied this information to facilitate new interaction patterns that improved the individual student's social integration into the classroom peer ecology.

Results of a field experiment further suggest the potential for teachers' attunement to improve students' experiences in the classroom peer ecology. Van den Berg, Segers, and Cillessen (2011) re-arranged children's seat assignments based on students' peer nominations of one another. Students who nominated each other as "liked least" were seated close together in experimental classrooms; seating charts were not altered in control classrooms. The most negatively perceived students experienced greater gains in likeability in experimental versus control classrooms following the use of seating arrangement based on knowledge of individual students' disliking of classmates. Although this study did not involve teachers acting on their own attunement to students' peer relationships, the findings suggest that if teachers develop an attunement to students' relationships within the peer ecology and act on this knowledge, they can enhance their students' social preference.

Taken together, the results of these two studies suggest that elementary school students' social integration (i.e., centrality) and social preference can be enhanced by teacher attunement, but that a precise attunement may be required to benefit individual students' actual relationships within the peer ecology. That is, in both studies, teachers (or researchers) were acting on an attunement to the affiliative patterns of individual students, not to the peer group memberships within the class as a whole. Yet, the extent to which a precise attunement is required is unknown. This distinction between teachers' broad attunement to peer group affiliation versus precise attunement to individual students' affiliates has implications for theorizing about teachers' influences on peer relations. Identifying the types of attunement needed by teachers to support students' social integration and status helps to clarify mechanisms through which teachers' invisible hand operates in the classroom. Moreover, it is valuable to determine the extent to which a precise attunement is necessary to support students' social integration or status, or if a broad attunement is sufficient in teacher practice. Through professional development, teachers can improve their broad attunement (Hamm et al., 2011). A precise attunement to individual students' peer group affiliations is expected to be more difficult for teachers to maintain than a broad attunement; identifying the extent to which there is added value for teachers to maintain a more

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