



Peer influence on disruptive classroom behavior depends on teachers' instructional practice



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether early adolescents' disruptive classroom behavior is predicted by descriptive classroom norms for such behavior (i.e., mean level of classmates' disruptive behaviors). We further examined whether classmates' influence on a student's disruptive behavior varies based on teacher's instructional practice. Participants were 701 adolescents ($M = 13.12$ years; 48.8% girls) who were followed across six measurement points from Grades 7 through 9. Multilevel analyses showed that subsequent individual disruptive behavior was predicted by earlier levels of disruptive behavior in the classroom. Peer influence on disruptive behavior was lower when students perceived that their teacher's instruction was more supportive and interesting. When students reported that their teacher used more ability differentiation (e.g., ability grouping), peer influence on disruptive behavior was higher.

Classroom disruptions by students include a broad set of rule-breaking behaviors, such as excessive talking during instructions, throwing items around, or walking around in the classroom at inappropriate times (Little, 2005; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Such behaviors disrupt academic instruction and are associated with low achievement and subsequent behavioral problems (Blank & Shavit, 2016; Le Blanc, Swisher, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007; Loeber et al., 1993). Frequent disruptive behavior in the classroom is also correlated with teacher burnout (Hastings & Bham, 2003).

Several reasons have been identified for the occurrence of disruptive behavior in the classroom. Some authors have focused on students' individual characteristics, such as attention deficits (e.g., Déry, Toupin, Pauzé, & Verlaan, 2004). Others have emphasized teachers' quality of instruction and classroom management (e.g., Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008). Yet others have focused on peer influence in the classroom as a cause of disruptive behavior (e.g., Müller & Zurbriggen, 2016; Shin & Ryan, 2014, 2017). For example, students may reinforce each other's disruptive behavior, leading to a general increase in disruptive behavior in the classroom (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). These processes may be especially pronounced in early- and mid-adolescence, when peers have considerable impact on individual development (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011). An important question is whether teachers can reduce such negative peer influences in the classroom.

To address this issue, it is crucial to examine how teachers' instructional practices are related to peer influence on disruptive

behavior in the classroom. In recent years, much effort has been spent on identifying individual characteristics that increase youth susceptibility to peer influence (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). However, remarkably little is known about the role of aspects of the learning environment, such as teacher characteristics. An exception is a recent study by Shin and Ryan (2017). They examined friend influence in fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms that were either high or low in emotional support from teachers. Across six months, students were less likely to adopt their classroom friends' disruptive behaviors when emotional support from their teacher (e.g., positive climate, sensitivity) was high. This suggests that teachers can have an effect on peer influence in the classroom by providing an emotionally supportive environment for their students. The first goal of the current study was to replicate Shin and Ryan's (2017) findings on the effects of teacher support on peer influence on disruptive behaviors in the classroom. We focused on student-perceived support from teachers for students' academic needs. In addition, we explored how academically interesting instruction and ability differentiation by teachers, as seen by their students, were associated with peer influence on classroom disruptive behaviors. We expected all three instructional practices (i.e., support, interesting instruction, ability differentiation) to differentially activate adolescents' academic or social goals, and that these practices would in turn be associated with the degree to which classmates influence each other's disruptive behaviors.

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1. Peer influence on disruptive behavior

Various processes may underlie peer influence on disruptive classroom behaviors. One may be adolescents' desire for popularity. Being popular means being visible and having a good reputation; to achieve this goal, adolescents often rely on rule-breaking behaviors (Cillessen & van den Berg, 2012; Jonkmann, Trautwein, & Lüdtke, 2009; Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008). When students experience that their disruptive behaviors are reinforced by their classmates, the probability of repeating these behaviors increases. Furthermore, adolescents who observe their classmates disrupting instruction learn how to effectively and efficiently do so (Bandura, 1986).

In addition to social learning processes, the general level of disruptive behavior in a classroom can function as a descriptive group norm that indicates what is “normal” in this class (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1990; Henry et al., 2000). In classrooms with high levels of disruptive behaviors, not being disruptive means deviating from the classroom norm, which may lead to negative responses from peers. In line with this reasoning, there is growing evidence that the average level of antisocial behaviors in a classroom affects students' individual development of such behaviors (e.g., Araos, Cea, Fernández, & Valenzuela, 2014; Henry et al., 2000; Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Jalongo, 1998; Müller, Hofmann, Fleischli, & Studer, 2016; Thomas, Bierman, & Powers, 2011).

2. Teachers' instructional practice as a moderator of peer influence

Adolescents influence each other at school, yet susceptibility to peer influence differs between adolescents (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). Certain characteristics, such as being male, impulsive, popular, and unsupervised by parents increase the risk of being negatively influenced by peers (Fallu, Brière, Vitaro, Cantin, & Borge, 2011; Gardner, Dishion, & Connell, 2008; Müller, Hofmann, & Arm, 2017; Selfhout, Branje, & Meeus, 2008). The effect of other factors on peer influence susceptibility are less clear, such as students' academic achievement, school connectedness, and teacher bonding, and results are mixed (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002; Mrug & Windle, 2009). Shin and Ryan's (2017) study on the role of teacher characteristics in peer influence added to this research. Based on their findings they suggested that emotional support from teachers may create classroom peer norms that inhibit disruptive behaviors (see also, Luckner & Pianta, 2011).

Emotional support can include teacher behaviors aimed at students' general well-being (e.g., comforting a student who is sad), and it can also include support aimed at their academic achievement (e.g., individually encouraging a student who is solving a task). Both types of emotional support may contribute to positive peer norms in the classroom. Beyond providing emotional support, teachers may impact peer influence in other ways. In the following we describe how teachers' instruction may differentially activate students' goals at school and thereby affect peer influence processes. While not being able to empirically test the role of students' goals with our data, this conceptualization serves as a theoretical rationale for why different instructional practices may moderate peer influence on disruptive behaviors.

Individual goals are a central component of students' school motivation. Goals can be conceptualized as internal representations of the desired outcomes that adolescents attempt to accomplish in school (Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2012). This conceptualization addresses *what* students want to achieve and not *why* they want to achieve it (Wentzel, 1993). Adolescents can have different *academic goals* (for an overview, see, e.g., Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). In the present theoretical framework academic goals were of specific importance that relate to the mastery of academic content including, for example, wanting to know more about a specific subject or becoming more proficient in a

certain academic domain (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). At the same time, students have *social goals* (Boekaerts, 2009; Cillessen, 2011; King & Watkins, 2012; Ryan, Jamison, Shin, & Thompson, 2012; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). For example, a main social goal of adolescents is to achieve popularity among their peers (e.g., Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010); early adolescents have reported prioritizing popularity over friendships or empathy for a less fortunate peer (e.g., Dijkstra et al., 2010; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010).

Bringing together this literature on students' goals and peer influence on disruptive classroom behaviors, it can be expected that academic goals (e.g., trying to solve a mathematical problem) decrease peer influence on disruptive behaviors, as students will focus on academics and not on social issues in the classroom. In contrast, social goals (i.e., wanting to be popular) may increase peer influence, as students will focus on both their classmates' behaviors and their classmates' thoughts about them.

Adolescents usually have both academic and social goals, which compete when students are in school (Brown & Lawrence, 2016; Hofer & Fries, 2016; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Cues in the learning environment may prompt them to be more concerned with some goals than with others (Boekaerts, 2009). In the classroom, the teacher is an important source of cues (Dowson, McInerney, & Nelson, 2006; Hamm & Hoffman, 2016; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). If a teacher uses an instructional practice that activates students' academic goals rather than their social goals, then peers' influence on disruptive behaviors may be reduced. In this study, in line with the literature we focused on three instructional practices related to school motivation (e.g., Ames, 1992; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009).

First, we examined students' perceptions of teacher *support* (Wentzel, 2009). We focused specifically on academic support, which may include providing individual help for students with questions, explaining incorrect answers, and taking seriously students' ideas for how to solve a problem. According to our theoretical framework, academic support may keep students focused on their academic goals, whereas diminished support may result in negative attitudes about school work and a shift to peer-related goals in the classroom accompanied by more peer influence.

Second, we examined students' perceptions of whether their teacher's instruction was academically *interesting* (e.g., Schiefele, 2009). Interesting instruction may include using different methods, examples, and pictures for explanations, and making connections to real-life problems. Instruction that is perceived as more interesting can be expected to decrease students' focus on social goals and consequently decrease classmates' influence on disruptive behaviors. If instruction is perceived as less interesting, students' attention may shift to their social goals and peer influence on disruptive behaviors may increase.

Third, we examined the instructional practice of *ability differentiation*. Ability differentiated instruction provides students with different tasks according to their proficiency, or divides the classroom into ability-matched groups with separate tasks (e.g., Lou et al., 1996; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). This practice is less clear in terms of which goals it may activate. On the one hand, such instruction could closely match students' ability levels and thus keep them focused on academic goals. On the other hand, if students perceive that teachers have visibly marked where they stand academically compared to their classmates, this could also activate their social goals (Ames, 1992). Students may then compare themselves to each other and define their social status according to their teacher's publicly communicated ability level (Schuncke, 1978). Students who receive the message that they have low academic abilities may instead attempt to gain status via rule-breaking behaviors (Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Furthermore, ability-matched small groups are hard for teachers to monitor, thus they create more room for non-academic interactions. These interactions may be positive (e.g., making new

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