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## Peer status and classroom seating arrangements: A social relations analysis



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 5 February 2014

Revised 8 September 2014

Available online 11 October 2014

#### Keywords:

Proximity

Popularity

Likeability

Classroom seating arrangements

Social status

Social relations modeling

### ABSTRACT

The current studies addressed the associations of classroom seating arrangements with peer status using the social relations model. Study 1 examined whether physical distance between classmates was associated with likeability and popularity. Participants were 336 children from 14 fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms ( $M_{\text{age}} = 11.36$  years, 47.3% boys). Children who sat closer to the center of the classroom were liked more. Moreover, classmates who sat closer together liked each other more and perceived each other as more popular. Study 2 examined whether children's likeability and popularity judgments were also reflected in the way they positioned themselves relative to their peers when they could arrange their classroom themselves. Participants were 158 children from 6 fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms ( $M_{\text{age}} = 11.64$  years, 50.5% boys). Participants placed liked and popular peers closer to themselves than disliked and unpopular peers. If children placed a classmate closer to themselves, they perceived that peer as better liked and more popular and were perceived as better liked and more popular in return. Implications for further research on classroom seating arrangements and peer relationships are discussed.

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### Introduction

Teachers can play an important role in children's academic and social development as they structure and arrange the daily lives of students at school (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Hughes, 2012).

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Studies have shown that teacher practices and classroom management are related to students' academic performance and engagement (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Teachers are also important for children's social development as they operate as authorities on social rules and behaviors and as facilitators of activities that foster social interaction (Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, & Hamm, 2011). Recently, Farmer and colleagues (2011) introduced the "invisible hand of the teacher"—a metaphor for the relatively understudied teacher practices that affect classroom social ecology and peer relationships. One such practice that may greatly affect classroom peer relationships is the arrangement of classroom seating positions. Teachers rearrange seating regularly, thereby facilitating children's opportunities to cooperate and interact with near-seated peers. Yet, the associations of such arrangements with classroom peer relationships have not been studied. The current studies fill this gap in the literature.

### *Classroom seating and peer relations*

For decades, researchers have been interested in the effects of physical proximity on interpersonal contact and the development and maintenance of social relations (Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, & Zheng, 1995; Little, 1965; McAndrew, 1993). It has been argued that mere exposure to an object or person can create a positive attitude about that object or person or even about a similar stimulus one has not been exposed to (Zajonc, 1968, 2001). When people are repeatedly exposed to a stimulus, they become more positive about it even without conscious cognition (Zajonc, 2001). According to this theory of mere exposure, familiarity with an object induces positive affect (Bornstein, 1989; Rhodes, Halberstadt, & Brajkovich, 2001; Zajonc, 1968, 2001). Others have argued that the effect does not come from mere exposure but rather from the reinforcement that stems from the social interaction with the person one is exposed to. Intergroup contact theory states that people think more positively about each other when they are brought together and interact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Initially, this theory stated that contact situations needed to meet four key conditions in order to induce liking and reduce prejudice: equal group status, common goals among group members, cooperation, and support from authorities (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). However, a meta-analysis indicated that these conditions are not essential (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006); increased interaction leads to more liking under a variety of circumstances even if the four conditions are not met. In line with these two theories, many studies among adults have shown that physical exposure and closeness to others induce social interaction and positive affect (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008; McAndrew, 1993; Mehrabian, 1972). However, little is known about whether such processes also take place among children at school.

In their daily lives, children spend a large amount of time at school in the company of peers (Dijkstra & Veenstra, 2011; Steinberg, 2013). Outside of the classroom, they can decide for themselves who to hang out with and sit next to. In class, however, desks are arranged in a certain way and students are assigned to seats by their teacher. Various types of arrangements are used—groups, rows, U-shaped seating, and even an open-plan classroom with undivided flexible arrangements (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). Regardless of type, seating arrangements determine students' proximity to each other. When teachers place children at specific positions in the classroom, they determine who children sit next to, who children are frequently exposed to, and who children interact with the most. Given the impact of exposure and interpersonal contact, researchers have argued that proximity to peers and teachers in the classroom should be studied in relationship to students' social functioning (MacAulay, 2006; Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008).

Previous research on proximity to peers and teachers in the classroom has focused mainly on academic performance and engagement, showing that seating location is related to academic achievement, on-task behavior, and student–teacher interaction (Hastings & Schweiso, 1995; MacAulay, 2006; Marx, Fuhrer, & Hartog, 1999; Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). Far less is known about the way in which seating arrangements may be associated with social relationships among classmates. When asking teachers about their grouping strategies, it was found that teachers create seating arrangements as a means to promote new friendships rather than improve existing friendships (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Moreover, a study by Babad and Ezer (1993) examined the association between seating location (front vs. back, center vs. sides) and peer relations. The authors found that students who were well liked by their teacher ("teacher's pets") or flattered their teacher ("flatterers") sat in the front

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