

**How Inclusive Practices in the Classroom Affect Children's Social and Emotional
Development:
A Review of the Literature**

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Abstract

This literature review analyzes current and past research surrounding inclusivity in the classroom and how it affects children's social and emotional development. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of teachers fostering an inclusive environment within their classrooms. This paper touches on peer interactions, the effects of rejection amongst peers, gender stereotypes, and a teacher's role in navigating each of these.

Introduction

How do inclusive practices in the classroom affect children's social and emotional development? This literature review will explore this question in-depth with multiple peer-reviewed articles and other sources.

Research shows that children's social and emotional development can benefit from inclusive practices in the classroom. Inclusion requires us to look at our schools, classrooms, and curriculum to understand how they play a role in creating a safe, inclusive environment for all children to participate in and feel supported. The article *Promoting Inclusive Communities in Diverse Classrooms: Teacher Attunement and Social Dynamics Management* (Farmer, Hamm, Dawes, Barko-Alva, & Cross, 2019) talks about what inclusion means and includes a quotation from another source.

Inclusion should not be viewed as a practice in which learners with diverse needs are brought into the general education classrooms as though they are visitors while students who do not receive special services are taught to be good hosts who tolerate and accept them. Rather, it is everyone's classroom and everyone has different needs regardless as to whether they are identified as general education students, students with disabilities, academically gifted students, or emergent bilingual students. (Adler & Adler, 1998; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Masten 2001)

The Significant Role of Peers in a Child's Life

Interactions with peers have a significant role in a child's life. The experience of belonging and acceptance through interpersonal relationships is fundamental to a child's health and well-being. The *Heartbreak of Social Rejection: Young Children's Expressions about How They Experience Rejection from Peers in ECEC* (2018), collects data through video-recorded interviews of children ages 3.5 – 6 years old in Norway and analyzed their experiences. Their findings in this study indicate that a child's emotional state could be affected by interactions amongst peers, particularly peer rejection. "The findings reveal that peer rejections are experienced as stressful and emotionally painful events, which affect the children's emotional state and impact their social self-perception" (Nergaard, 2018). Rejection even at a young age can be detrimental to a person's well-being. More often than not, people want to feel included and they thrive in a more inclusive environment. According to an article by Wilhelmina Jewell Strong-Sparks, the pain of rejection can run deeply and researchers have even attributed the pain experienced to that of a physical injury. Strong-Sparks included a quotation from an outside source.

Social rejection can influence emotion, cognition, and even physical health. "Humans have a fundamental need to belong. Just as we have needs for food and water, we also have needs for positive and lasting relationships," says C. Nathan DeWall, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Kentucky. "This need is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history and has all sorts of consequences for modern psychological process." Social rejection and the lack of inclusion eventually takes its toll physically, mentally, and emotionally."

Peer and social rejection is inevitable during one's lifetime, but the rate and intensity it is experienced can be helped by how adults handle inclusion and the importance we give it in our day to day life, especially within the classroom setting. Other studies involving children and peer rejection have been mainly quantitative. The research that *Heartbreak of Social Rejection: Young Children's Expressions about How They Experience Rejection from Peers in ECEC* (2018) provides delves deeper into how rejection makes children feel by giving them a voice. One huge takeaway from this article that was quoted from an outside source was, "Reasonably, when young children are preoccupied with their own social defeats and the suppression of

negative emotions, the search for and deployment of positive strategies to re-establish social inclusion is thought to occur less frequently (Stenseng et al., 2015)”

Gender in the Classroom

Keeping with the theme of inclusion in the classroom and with children’s social and emotional development, *Dealing with Gender in the Classroom: A Portrayed Case Study of Four Teachers* (2012), explores another important area of focus pertaining to gender stereotypes. This article was a qualitative case study that took place in a United States preschool and focused on how a teacher’s influence can affect children’s gender identities. As of 2021, roughly 88% of 5-year-olds, 69% of 4-year-olds, and 40% of 3-year-olds attend preschool (Financial Samurai, 2022). These percentages are significant because children spend many hours at school and their experience there is influential on their development. Before children are even born, people often speculate as to whether or not the child will be male or female. When the answer is revealed, their perspective of the child changes based upon the answer. Shopping for your child, you may find that stores will segregate the genders and place toys, clothes, etc., in their respective categories solely based on gender. According to *Dealing with Gender in the Classroom: A Portrayed Case Study of Four Teachers* (2012), “...the environment to which children are exposed has a strong impact on children’s gender development” (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012). Research has shown that teachers and peers are important in a child’s gender socialization. The article also mentions a study done that sheds light on a teacher’s role in the classroom with gender inclusion.

In her recent study of gender and classrooms, Blaise (2005) argued that teachers can disrupt traditional stereotypes by encouraging children to resist gender norms. She argues that preschool teachers need to create and promote alternative discourses in which children cannot be situated as exclusively male or female, but as human beings. These alternative discourses will provide different scripts that can allow multiple subjectivities and opportunities for children to position themselves (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012, p. 27).

For this study, data was gathered through means of participant and non-participant observations of classrooms and teachers’ meetings for 16 weeks, each classroom being observed for at least 25 hours. There was an observation that two planning meetings per week were held. As these observations progressed, each teacher was found to have their own way of modeling gender in

their classroom. In a teacher named Katherine's class, there was a situation observed where a young boy is observed holding a long-haired baby doll and placing it in a pink stroller. Katherine said that the "pretend play" area has been mainly enjoyed by the boys as of late. This teacher promotes this type of exploration in the classroom and believes that gender is not just for male and female. Another teacher named Sarah practiced inclusivity in her classroom as well. "For Sarah, working with the children is about making choices available to them, and about ensuring that these choices are inclusive" (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012). Being mindful of gender and having the mindset of inclusivity can help to combat bullying as children age. Unfortunately, this was not the case for an exploratory study conducted in 1997. *An Exploratory Study of Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Gender Roles (1997)*, revealed "a third finding was that although teachers appear to have nontraditional gender role beliefs for children, they are more accepting of cross-gender role behaviors and aspirations from girls than boys." (Cahill & Adams, 1997). For the classrooms studied in Giraldo and Colyar's article, observations indicated that the preschool has tried to combat those older ideas and instead nurture the exploration across all genders.

Not only do these teachers value exploration and inclusion of different ways of being masculine and feminine, but they also promote them and/or do not censure them [in] their classrooms. Likewise, the portraits of these teachers raise awareness of how through everyday school interactions, teachers impact the construction of children's gender identities in multiple ways: selecting topics and materials, talking with children, setting up the environment, letting children explore different gender performances and engaging children in a variety of activities. (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012, p. 36)

Promoting Inclusive Communities in Diverse Classrooms

One can see from the articles mentioned above that teacher's attitudes toward inclusion, the curriculum, and peer relationship all have an affect on a child's social and emotional development. Gender is one of many areas that needs attention for inclusivity. *Promoting Inclusive Communities in Diverse Classrooms: Teacher Attunement and Social Dynamics Management (2019)* opens the door to more diversity within the classroom, such as learners with diverse needs, emergent bilingual students, academically gifted students, and more. This article spoke about the BASE Model (Behavioral, Academic, and Social Engagement). Response to

Intervention and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports are being brought together into Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and are helping learners with diverse needs in general education classrooms.

Teachers trained in the BASE model are more likely to use effect strategies in critical management domains including classroom structure, communication with students, motivation strategies, and management of social dynamics, and they use more positive feedback and less negative feedback redirection (Motoca et al., 2014). In addition, compared to teachers in control settings, BASE teachers indicate a greater sense of efficacy for supporting students (Farmer et al., 2010) and demonstrate greater attunement to classroom peer groups and students' social roles and relationships (Hamm et al., 2011). (Farmer, et al., 2019, p. 300)

Additionally, students in BASE classrooms tend to have better social experiences. This included students with disabilities, academically gifted students, and students from racial and ethnic minorities. Just as *An Exploratory Study of Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Gender Roles* (1997) spoke about a teacher's role in helping promote diversity and inclusivity in the classroom, *Promoting Inclusive Communities in Diverse Classrooms: Teacher Attunement and Social Dynamics Management* (2019) speaks about teachers' attunement to their classroom dynamic and fostering positive interactions among children. *The Heartbreak of Social Rejection: Young Children's Expressions about How They Experience Rejection from Peers in ECEC* (2018) studied the emotional affect that peer rejection can have on a child even at a young age. A teacher's attunement is crucial for developing a diverse classroom and, by doing so, they have the opportunity to handle problems in their classroom while guiding students to the path of inclusivity and equity amongst their peers.

Teachers are embedded in the classroom social system and are, themselves, a factor in ongoing social dynamics. In this role, teachers may not be able to see all that is happening in terms of critical social processes and may be unaware of their own impact on classroom peer dynamics. Teachers need additional "eyes and ears" on what is happening in the class. (Farmer et al., 2019)

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to understand how inclusive practices in the classroom can affect children's social and emotional development. Each of the sources discussed above sheds light onto different aspects of inclusion in the classroom, one being gender stereotypes. Many of these studies offered qualitative research methods that offered a lens into the classroom; amplifying the voice of children, observing the classroom, speaking to teachers, etc. These studies provide improved insight into understanding classroom dynamics, the role of teachers, the role of administration, and the role of the community in promoting inclusivity in the classroom. Teachers can help to create a positive classroom climate in their room by potentially incorporating the BASE model in their classroom, adjusting their curriculum to better support the inclusion of diversity within their teachings, and by staying attuned to peer dynamics within the environment. Teachers and families can work to collaborate to understand each family's dynamic and culture such as; consistent lines of open – communication (understanding the family's preferences on how best to communicate), school-based family engagement activities that help form even more connections within the school community, and making sure to evaluate your method of engagement with families to reassess that it is equitable for families to be part of the engagements. It may be helpful to set up Teacher-Family meetings to improve relational skills with families and cultivate a forum for everyone to share their views. Other ways that families can help with collaboration could be volunteering as a guest speaker to learn more about their family/background and book donations to expand on more diverse literature in the classroom. In addition, all teachers can, and should, reflect upon their own beliefs and how they engage with the children in their environment to not exclude anyone. The more teachers, families, and the community within the school engage, the more effort can be made to better support positive inclusion. This analysis of the current research and literature is significant because a teacher's role in a child's life while they're in the classroom, especially in an early childhood teacher, has a tremendous influence on a child's social and emotional well-being.

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