

## **Promoting social inclusion in educational settings: Challenges and opportunities**

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**Abstract**

The goal of the current paper is to provide a critical analysis of barriers to social inclusion in schools and propose inclusive educational practices that help connect and unite diverse students. Diversity is defined broadly as overall heterogeneity. We review theoretical frameworks that help explain group dynamics and contextual conditions that contribute to exclusion (i.e., peer victimization, rejection, friendlessness) of students based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, body weight, etc. We argue that to be able to facilitate peer acceptance and cross-group friendships, educators need to be aware of group and interpersonal dynamics, and how some common school practices highlight differences and segregate students in ways that further promote divisions. We propose proactive practices as “built-in” preventions to increase social inclusion, in addition to summarizing relevant intervention approaches. To conclude, we recommend greater emphasis on social inclusion in teacher education and professional development as well as provide suggestions for future research.

**Promoting social inclusion in educational settings: Challenges and opportunities**

In this opening article to the special issue on social inclusion, we approach the topic of inclusion from a social developmental perspective. We presume that peer acceptance and having friends are developmental necessities—rather than luxuries—that help students do better in school (Ladd, 1990). Although social inclusion does not guarantee that students excel academically, their engagement and performance are easily compromised by experiences of exclusion. It is therefore critical to understand why some students are marginalized or isolated in school. Here, we focus on contextual accounts of social exclusion. Rather than presuming that social exclusion is the problem of the rejected, bullied, or friendless, we suggest that environmental conditions contribute to the marginalization and isolation of students with stigmatized attributes (e.g., those with disabilities, overweight) or identities (e.g., ethnic minority, immigrant, and sexual minority youth). In an effort to understand pathways to inclusion, we discuss how both the student body composition (i.e., the “who”) and school organizational and instructional practices (i.e., the “how”) contribute to social exclusion. Consistent with recent calls for schools to act as “agents of change” to reduce bias and discrimination (Losinski, Ennis, Katsiyannis, & Rapa, 2019), we contend that school administrators and teachers play critical roles in facilitating social inclusion.

In this paper, *social inclusion* refers to more than just a shared physical space (i.e., attending the same school or classroom). Relying on a social-developmental perspective (cf. Fabes, Martin, & Hanish, 2018), we use the term inclusion to indicate social acceptance by peers and having caring friends, while inclusive climate refers to environments characterized by positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony. By focusing on social experiences and relationships across a range of student identities and attributes, we extend prior analyses of

inclusion that focus on students' subjective perceptions of school belonging. For the purposes of this paper, we define *diversity* broadly to refer to a range of differences (i.e., greater heterogeneity) across students. An expansive definition is used to identify commonalities in the school-based experiences of youth with a wide range of identities and attributes, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity, social class, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and disability status. By focusing on the general, rather than group-specific or unique, challenges (see Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018) facing diverse students, we are not implying that the aforementioned social identities and individual attributes are all the same. Rather, our goal is to “still the waters” to be able to identify shared issues across a wide array of groups. Specifically, we seek to understand some of the conceptually consistent environmental predictors of exclusion (as opposed to inconsistent predictors that vary across groups and stigmatized attributes; cf. Brandt & Crawford, 2019), with the goal of identifying educational policies and practices that can facilitate the social inclusion of all youth.

To make a case for why social inclusion matters in K-12 schools, we start this paper by briefly reviewing the educational costs (e.g., academic disengagement, lower grades) associated with peer victimization, social rejection, and friendlessness. Relying on multiple theoretical frameworks and concepts, we then identify reasons why different groups of students (e.g., boys and girls, different ethnic groups) are not necessarily socially integrated and why particular students (e.g., sexual minorities and students with overweight) are at higher risk for peer victimization and social isolation than others. That is, we describe the challenging peer dynamics that easily unfold “organically” unless they are disrupted. In the next section, we address environmental reasons for lack of social inclusion by reviewing commonly implemented

organizational and instructional practices in K-12 schools (e.g., academic tracking, resource rooms) that highlight differences and separate groups of students.

Following analyses of problematic school practices, we discuss ways to facilitate social inclusion in school settings. Based on theories and empirical evidence, specific practices are suggested as “built-in” preventions (e.g., instructional approaches, providing extracurricular options) that help unite diverse students. Specifically, teachers’ and school administrators’ awareness and sensitivity to situations that potentially divide and marginalize students are highlighted (Gray et al., 2018). Finally, we summarize several promising intervention and curriculum-based approaches for schools to facilitate social inclusion, to prevent exclusion, and provide recommendations for future research and inclusive educational practices.

### **1. Social Exclusion and School Adjustment**

Students’ academic and social lives are integrally intertwined (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996), and therefore lack of inclusion can have significant educational costs. Indeed, students who are relegated to the social margins of their schools fare worse academically. For example, when ethnic minority students contend with discrimination and mistreatment by their schoolmates, they become less engaged and more likely to drop out of school (Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Similarly, sexual minority youth, who experience greater school-based social isolation relative to their heterosexual counterparts (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Xuan, 2012), are more frequently absent and have lower expectations for educational attainment compared to their heterosexual peers (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014). Also, students with overweight, who are overrepresented as friendless (Strauss & Pollack, 2003), receive lower grades and are less likely to attend college than their peers (Crosnoe & Muller, 2004; Crosnoe, 2007). Although there is not necessarily research documenting all the links between lack of social inclusion and

school performance for each of the aforementioned groups of students, the following summary sheds light on the general processes by which exclusion impairs academic success. We summarize the research on social exclusion separately for peer victimization, rejection, and friendlessness because these topics are typically studied in isolation, although the experiences frequently overlap (i.e., victimized or bullied students are also rejected and friendless). The premise of the following summary is that academic difficulties often reflect students' negative social experiences in school.

### **1.1 Peer Victimization**

School can be a very unpleasant place for students who are bullied or victimized by their classmates. Peer victimization experiences—ranging from covert rumors to overt name-calling and physical aggression—are potent stressors for school-aged youth (Juvonen & Graham, 2014) and take a toll on students' academic performance (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). For example, students who are bullied by their peers are absent from school more frequently and receive lower grades in elementary (van Lier et al., 2012) and secondary (Ladd, Ettekal, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2017) school.

Several potential pathways from victimization to academic outcomes have been proposed and tested in past research. First, when students are made fun of or called names, they typically experience emotional distress that can explain why they fall behind academically. Findings have shown that experiences of peer victimization predict loneliness, depression, and low self-worth, and such distress indicators in turn predict poorer GPAs and test scores in elementary school (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005) as well as increased truancy, absences, and lower grades in middle school (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000). Such patterns may also become cyclical, as suggested by studies documenting low achievement as a precursor to peer

victimization (Estell et al., 2009) and subsequent distress symptoms over time (Vaillancourt, Brittain, McDougall, & Duku, 2013). Another potential pathway from victimization to academic problems is through physical health. Bullied youth experience greater somatic complaints (e.g., headaches) and other physical ailments that increase school absences and disrupt learning processes (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005).

Additionally, peer victimization experiences affect students' cognitive resources, in turn interfering with their ability to adapt to, and engage with, the demands of school (Schwartz et al., 2005). For example, with a bully present in the classroom, the concern for ridicule and humiliation may preoccupy victimized children to the point that they cannot focus on instruction. Such hypervigilance and negative expectations can, in turn, significantly impede academic performance. Indeed, starting in the elementary grades, bullied children exhibit lower levels of effortful control (Iyer, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thompson, 2010) and greater difficulty focusing on school tasks (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). In one study following students from kindergarten through fifth grade, lack of classroom participation and increased school avoidance explained why earlier peer victimization predicted lower test scores (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

Some students experience greater risk for peer victimization than others, and particular groups of students experience mistreatment and, in turn, academic difficulties, because of their social identities. For example, youth exposed to peer racial discrimination at school display lower levels of interest in school (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008) and have lower GPAs in high school (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). Also, middle and high school victims of homophobic bullying report lower grades, greater truancy, and lower perceived importance of graduating; these effects are in part explained by increases in suicidality and decreased school

belonging (Poteat et al., 2011). Notably, the aforementioned effects of homophobic victimization were documented over and above overall/general victimization, suggesting that there may be particularly negative social-emotional and academic consequences of identity- or bias-based harassment experiences (see also Mulvey et al., 2018). Being targeted by peers on the basis of uncontrollable and/or stable personal characteristics (e.g., race, sexual orientation) may heighten students' feelings of self-blame and corresponding distress (Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

## **1.2 Peer Rejection**

Peer rejection refers to low social status in a classroom, typically manifesting in classmates' dislike and avoidance of a particular peer. Consistent with the findings of research on peer victimization, students who are rejected are unlikely to engage in class. Elementary school students who are rejected by their classmates display lower classroom participation, demonstrate greater school avoidance (Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Reiser, 2008), and receive lower grades (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Rejected pre-adolescents, compared to their more accepted peers, are also more likely to subsequently drop out of school (Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992).

There are multiple ways to interpret the links between rejection and compromised academic outcomes. Peer rejection may indicate underlying behavioral (e.g., aggressive behaviors) or psychological problems (e.g., emotion regulation difficulties or impulsivity; Parker & Asher, 1987). Indeed, rejected youth display a range of disruptive behaviors (specifically aggression in early and middle childhood; Asher & Coie, 1990), and aggressive-rejected students are often academically disengaged (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Moreover, because aggression is associated with school disengagement—independent of peer rejection (e.g., Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006)—rejection may amplify the risks associated with behavioral or



emotional difficulties affecting academic disengagement (Juvonen, 2006). For example, when classmates leave an emotionally reactive classmate out of a group or an activity, the student is likely to get more dysregulated and be unable to focus on school work. Similarly, experiences of rejection among anxious or depressed students can exacerbate low self-esteem in ways that make them withdraw from, rather than engage in, classroom activities (cf. Lopez & DuBois, 2005).

There are also other attributes and identities, besides aggressive behaviors and emotional dysregulation, that increase the risk for peer rejection due to societal stigma. For example, even as early as first grade, children have been shown to reject peers with overweight (Goldfield & Chrisler, 1995). By adolescence, over two thirds of youth have witnessed students with overweight being ignored or avoided in school (Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2011). High school students also report that it is more acceptable to exclude peers who are gay or lesbian, as opposed to those who are straight (Heinze & Horn, 2014). In addition, immigrant youth experience greater rejection by peers compared to their native-born classmates (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017).

### **1.3 Friendlessness**

While many rejected and bullied students lack friends (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999), friendlessness can independently contribute to underachievement. Although few studies have directly assessed friendlessness (see Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004 for exception), research documenting how friends enhance school-related adjustment sheds light on the potential academic consequences of lacking friends. As early as kindergarten, friendless students, compared to peers with friends, are less likely to engage adaptively in class and are more likely to perform poorly (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). By adolescence, having a close pal at school provides youth with the support and confidence to engage academically in ways that facilitate achievement (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). For example, high school students

with more in-school friendships receive higher grades, in part because of greater school engagement (Witkow & Fuligni, 2010). Moreover, insofar as friends—especially those who are high-achieving—serve as sources of academic help (Wentzel, Jablansky, & Scalise, 2018; Zander, Chen, & Hannover, 2019), friendlessness can hinder access to school-related information critical for educational success.

Students with no friends receive lower grades and are less academically engaged compared to those with even just one friend (Ladd, 1990; Wentzel et al., 2004). Although some friendless youth may be preoccupied with attempts to gain acceptance and establish friendships at the expense of investment in academic work, others are likely to disengage and withdraw from school due to psychological distress (e.g., loneliness, depression; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Witvliet, Brendgen, van Lier, Koot, & Vitaro, 2010). Indeed, friendless youths' heightened perceptions of social threat and unsafety at school (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018) can compromise focus on school-related tasks and contribute to school disengagement. Even when students who lack friends are able to stay academically motivated, their isolated status limits access to the direct academic help and support from peers that is increasingly important across high school.

Although students can compensate for lack of academic support from friends with academic support from other sources (e.g., parents, teachers), not all students have such opportunities. For example, parents who have not graduated from high school or immigrant parents with limited English proficiency may not be in a position to help with their children's homework in middle or high school (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005). Alternatively, some students may hesitate to approach teachers. Immigrant or ethnic minority students, for example, may be concerned that help-seeking from teachers would reinforce negative stereotypes about them (e.g., Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007), and sexual and gender minority youth avoid approaching

their teachers because they anticipate being treated in a biased manner (Poteat, Scheer, & Mereish, 2014). Similarly, teachers' and parents' stereotypic expectations that students with overweight are lazy, unsuccessful, and unintelligent (Puhl & Latner, 2007) leave youth with higher weight even fewer options for academic assistance when friendless.

#### **1.4 Summary**

Taken together, past research demonstrates that certain groups of students experience heightened risk for peer victimization, rejection, and friendlessness. Such social challenges, in turn, are related to school absences, lack of engagement, and compromised academic performance. Victimization by peers increases emotional distress and somatic problems in ways that contribute to students' truancy, disengagement, and inability to focus on learning. Peer rejection is likely to amplify the behaviors that elicit peer rejection in the first place (aggression, emotion regulation difficulties, etc.) thereby interfering with learning. Lack of friends, in turn, restricts opportunities to seek and gain academic support from classmates. Regardless of the specific pathways, it is critical to understand that when ethnic minority and immigrant students, sexual and gender minority youth, and children with overweight fare worse academically, it is likely that their negative social experiences at least partly contribute to lack of engagement and lower achievement. To understand why certain groups of youth experience heightened risk for social mistreatment and academic maladjustment—and in which contexts they may be particularly susceptible—we now turn to theoretical and conceptual accounts that explain social exclusion.

### **2. Conceptual Accounts for Peer Exclusion at School**

Rather than assuming that there is something inherently problematic about the excluded students, here we shed light on social processes and contextual factors that help account for why

classmates bully, reject, and avoid befriending some of their peers. In so doing, social exclusion is approached mainly from the perspective of those who show prejudice toward, avoid, and mistreat their peers, although we also discuss the ways in which student fears or concerns about exclusion further promote divisions. We consider both intra-and inter-group processes (cf. Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Rutland, Nesdale, & Brown, 2017) and highlight social contextual factors.

## **2.1 Preference for Similar Others**

Starting from an early age, children show robust *ingroup favoritism*—that is, they prefer the group(s) they belong to more than any other group (Hailey & Olson, 2013). Although ingroup favoritism does not imply that children are prejudiced against outgroups (Allport, 1954), the behavioral manifestations of it may look like exclusion. Brewer (1999) captures this idea well as she suggests that forms of bias may develop not because of hate, but because positive feelings and actions (e.g., helping, caring for) are withheld from outgroup members. Consistent with ingroup favoritism, individuals affiliate with similar others (i.e., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). In diverse settings, such *homophily* (“birds of a feather flocking together”) often then divides groups (Stark & Flache, 2012). That is, students sort themselves into groups that are often more homogeneous than the overall setting.

In settings where some students are not part of the main groups (e.g., transgender students), homophily of other groups can result in their marginalization or isolation. For example, small numerical minority groups may “hunker down” and not seek the company of others because they are concerned about not being accepted. Indeed, ingroup friend selection is intensified for racial minorities when they are small in number (Quillian & Campbell, 2003). Students with stigmatized identities or attributes, in turn, easily become socially isolated because

they do not find refuge in similar others. For example, students with obesity display a negative bias toward obesity, similar to their non-overweight peers (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998). Thus, exclusion frequently involves ingroup preferences, homophily, negative expectations of others' reactions, as well as self-protective biases.

## 2.2 Social Norms

Social norms or expectations of how classmates should—and should not—act also help account for social exclusion. For example, lack of *person-group fit* (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986) predicts peer rejection. Testing such a mismatch effect, researchers manipulate the behavioral composition of small groups to observe how children react to someone who deviates from the behavioral norm. For example, aggressive boys in non-aggressive groups, and socially withdrawn boys in aggressive groups, are most likely to be rejected (Wright et al., 1986). These experimental findings have been replicated by relying on natural variations in social behaviors across classrooms. For example, across over 130 first grade classrooms, aggressive students were less included in settings with lower average levels of aggression, compared to classrooms with higher levels of aggressive behaviors—i.e., when such conduct was more normative (Stormshak, Bierman, Bruschi, Dodge, & Coie, 1999).

Social norms are also dictated by peers who have high social status. Popular students are influential (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011) and therefore in a position to shape what is considered desirable (e.g., Dijkstra & Gest, 2015) as well as what is not tolerated within a classroom or school. For example, by ridiculing a classmate with overweight, high-status bullies make weight norms salient, as they determine who is “in vs. out” (cf. Juvonen & Galván, 2009). We have examined such *norm “policing”* for body weight (Juvonen, Lessard, Schacter, & Enders, 2018) and gender typicality (Smith, Schacter, Enders, & Juvonen, 2018) across urban middle schools.

Our findings show that schools vary in the degree to which specific attributes are targeted and that norm policing matters over and above school level peer victimization. For example, controlling for school level victimization and students' victim reputations, the loneliness of students with higher weight is intensified in schools with stronger weight policing (Juvonen, Lessard, et al., 2018). Similarly, gender policing amplifies the social anxiety and loneliness of boys who do not see themselves as gender typical (Smith et al., 2018). Also, in schools with stronger policing of gender norms, boys report higher depressed mood regardless of their gender typicality. Thus, exclusion of students with particular characteristics makes specific norms salient, thereby increasing conformity pressures that adversely affect the emotional well-being of students who merely observe such norm policing.

Also, the basic social structure of schools and classrooms affects exclusionary behaviors. While some school contexts are fairly egalitarian, in other settings there are large differences in—or greater dispersion of—social status, implying a more *hierarchical structure* of peer relationships (e.g., Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014). Garandeau and colleagues specifically showed that greater hierarchical classroom structure predicts increased aggression over time. In other words, greater imbalance of power encourages the abuse of power (i.e., aggression) at the expense of the excluded.

### **2.3 Intergroup Dynamics**

In addition to considering ingroup biases and social norms within classrooms and schools, it is also critical to understand how relations across groups are associated with exclusion. Lack of physical proximity and absence of positive *contact* with diverse peers heightens ingroup favoritism and contribute to outgroup prejudice (Allport, 1954), thereby exacerbating divisions between groups. That is, when schools admit or select (either explicitly or

implicitly) students based on gender, race, or social class, there are few opportunities to get to know diverse peers. Even in settings with a diverse representation of students from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, students with and without disabilities, etc., outgroup prejudice can be maintained when students lack positive interactions with one another. However, creating opportunities for contact requires more than simply placing students from different groups in the same classroom because of the aforementioned biases toward one's own group.

Allport (1954) identifies conditions that hinder positive intergroup relations. When groups have *unequal status*, students are particularly unlikely to interact across groups in ways that help reduce prejudice and exclusionary behaviors. One might conceptualize and operationalize power or status in several different ways: based on societal position, social status or popularity within a classroom, or numerical representation in a given context. Social exclusion of outgroup members is also facilitated when groups (are presumed to) compete with one another and when authorities do not positively sanction intergroup interactions (Allport, 1954).

*Competition* implies that in order for one group to gain or succeed, another must lose or fail. Thus, competitors pose a threat. According to Allport (1954), such group dynamics are likely to arise in settings when *authority figures* do not make any effort to sanction positive intergroup contact. We will return to the discussion of the conditions of sub-optimal and optimal intergroup contact in the subsequent sections of this paper.

## 2.4 Summary

Taken together, there are multiple theoretical and conceptual accounts for social exclusion in school contexts. Students of all ages gravitate toward similar peers and away from dissimilar classmates, thereby contributing to lack of integration. Increased homophily does not promote inclusion for groups small in number (e.g., minority ethnic groups) and students with

stigmatized identities and attributes. Additionally, youth who do not behaviorally “fit in” with classroom behavioral norms, and particularly those who are bullied, remain on the social margins. When bullying targets certain attributes (looks or behaviors), the norms of what is not accepted or tolerated become salient and increase conformity pressures. Finally, lack of contact or competition maintain prejudice and therefore result in exclusionary behaviors, especially when instructors do not encourage cross-groups interactions and relationships. It is critical that teachers and school administrators comprehend all these dynamics to be able to prevent and decrease social exclusion. Moreover, educators need to see how some school practices make some of these dynamics worse.

### **3. School Practices that Highlight Differences and Segregate Students**

As discussed above, fostering inclusion with a diverse student body poses many challenges for teachers and school administrators. In this section, we provide examples of school organizational practices and teacher behaviors that conflict with goals for social inclusion. *Organizational practices* refer to how schools group students for instructional purposes based on their level of performance or educational needs. *Teacher behaviors* include creating goal structures that increase competition and relying on practices that highlight differences between groups or marginalize specific groups of students. While providing a critical analysis of some commonly used practices from the perspective of social inclusion, we recognize that schools and teachers rely on such strategies for practical pedagogical reasons or because of inadequate training or resources. Regardless, schools need to be aware of the downsides of their efforts if their goal is indeed to promote diversity and inclusion.

#### **3.1 Organizational Practices**



There are a number of school organization practices that group similar students together for instructional purposes. In practice, such grouping strategies divide students in ways that decrease exposure to and physical proximity with other students—thereby preventing the development of friendships (Juvonen, 2018). Moreover, instructional practices that distance groups are problematic as lack of cross-group interaction maintains stereotypes and negative attitudes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). In particular, academic tracking, second-language learner programs, and some special education practices warrant closer inspection.

*Academic tracking* is the practice of sorting students into different “tracks” of coursework based on perceived differences in academic competency or ability (Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994). While early advocates of the practice argued that tracking ensures better-quality instruction and gains in student achievement (e.g., Scott, 1993), the more recent findings based on evidence across 40 countries are mixed (Chiu, Chow, & Joh, 2017). From an intergroup relations perspective, the social ramifications of tracking are highly questionable given that a disproportionate number of Black and Latino students are assigned to lower tracks, relative to White and Asian students in American schools (Oakes, 2005). Such segregation limits the opportunities for students to interact with each other, precluding them from befriending ethnic outgroup peers (Moody, 2001). Moreover, because tracking tends to reify stereotypes, biases, and status differences between ethnic groups (Bigler & Lieben, 2007; Lee, 1996), it is likely to increase intergroup divisions.

Similar issues apply to *second-language learner programs* that separate students for instructional purposes. While intended to improve linguistic minority students’ English proficiency, both English-language learner programs and two-way immersion (i.e., bilingual) programs can codify structural inequalities within schools. For example, English-language

learner programs often function to isolate linguistic minority youth from the broader student body at school (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010; Katz, 1999). Bilingual programs, in contrast, adopt an asset-based approach by framing language education as “enrichment—rather than remediation” (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017, p. 407). In these programs, both native and non-native English speakers are included, creating opportunities for cross-group interactions. Where inequities arise is in the implementation of these programs; with an overrepresentation of White, English-speaking children relative to youth of Color (Palmer, 2010), the numerical imbalance heightens the power differentials. When linguistic minority youth are viewed as less capable, such programs increase the risk of school-based discrimination (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010).

Much like academic tracking and second-language learner programs, separating students for *special education* is presumed to facilitate schools’ ability to provide them with more individualized instruction (Bauer, 1994). Currently, youth receiving special education services receive instruction in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs, based on federal guidelines (see Farmer et al., 2019, this issue). Students with special needs are often placed in small numbers across general education classrooms and receive individualized instruction in resource rooms that separate them from their classmates for part of the day. This is in contrast to alternative practices such as placing a larger proportion of students with learning disabilities in a general education classroom and having a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-teach the class. In such integrated settings, students with and without special needs perform better academically compared to typical practices (Bear & Proctor, 1990), and students with special needs are as socially accepted as their general education peers (Juvonen & Bear, 1992). Thus, while well-intentioned from instructional perspectives, organizational practices that place students in small numbers across classrooms and separate them for part of

the day highlight their special needs in ways that are likely to hinder peer acceptance and the development of friendships.

### 3.2 Teacher Behaviors

Classrooms vary in how students are expected to learn and achieve—which in turn affects how they relate to their classmates. For example, teachers may emphasize individualistic goals (i.e., personal growth and improvement over time) or they may entice students to work hard by highlighting their standing relative to that of their classmates. Although from a motivational perspective individualistic and competitive goal structures or achievement orientations may be justifiable, they do not facilitate social inclusion (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). The negative social ramifications of *individualistic and competitive goal orientations* can be understood from the perspective of social interdependence theory (Deutsch & Krauss, 1965). When students focus on their own work and improvement, they are not concerned for the welfare or achievement of others (Roseth et al., 2008). Competition, in turn, creates negative interdependencies (Deutsch & Krauss, 1965), wherein one student's achievement detracts from, rather than contributes to, another student's success. Although teachers may not explicitly foster competitiveness, they may nevertheless rely on normative—as opposed to criterion-based—evaluation methods (i.e., “grade on the curve”) that emphasize social comparisons. When students try to outperform one another, oppositional interactions and aggression increase (DeRosier, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994). Thus, neither competitive nor individualistic goal orientations help facilitate social inclusion.

At times, teachers also rely on everyday practices that call attention to groups in ways that make differences salient. For example, teachers may greet students by saying “good morning boys and girls” or asking boys and girls to line up in separate parts of the classroom. This

practice implies *functional use of categories* (Bigler, 1995). Although splitting classes by gender is often done out of convenience, as it provides a rough half-and-half split, the practice nonetheless often draws attention to gender in ways that impede gender integration.

Finally, another way that teachers and school administrators perpetuate negative stereotypes is through *disciplinary action*. Teachers are more likely to display bias toward ethnic minority students for exhibiting antagonistic behaviors than toward White students for displaying the very same behaviors (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). For instance, Black students are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their non-Black peers (Gregory et al., 2016). Disproportionate discipline affects other marginalized groups as well, for example, sexual minority girls (Mittleman, 2018) and students in special education (Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014). Observing teachers discipline certain groups of students more frequently than others is likely to strengthen negative stereotypes in ways that affect how students relate to one another (cf. Bigler & Liben, 2007).

In sum, teacher actions—whether intentional (e.g., fostering particular classroom goal structures) or unintentional (e.g., functional use of categories)—have consequences for how students relate to one another. The question, then, is how teachers can promote equitable treatment, while also recognizing the individual differences and needs of their students.

#### **4. Opportunities to Promote Social Inclusion**

As discussed above, lack of inclusion is likely to arise unless school administrators and educators disrupt typical social dynamics (e.g., homophily) and avoid instructional practices that highlight differences and segregate groups of students. To facilitate social inclusion, we propose that students fare best when schools take a proactive approach to maximizing cross-group contact and purposefully facilitating positive peer interactions and relationships across diverse

students. Figure 1 captures the main elements of our *proactive inclusion model*. We propose that at the school level, the diversity of the student body needs to be maximized (see also Nishina et al., 2019, this volume), while inclusive strategies need to be implemented to increase student opportunities to connect with dissimilar peers within schools. Below we provide scientific rationale and practical examples for the four strategies that facilitate social inclusion: (1) maximizing diversity and ensuring equitable access, (2) increasing teachers' awareness and use of inclusive strategies, (3) promoting shared goals outside of the classroom context, and (4) facilitating cross-group friendships.

#### **4.1 Maximize Diversity and Ensure Equitable Access**

As mentioned earlier, providing opportunities for positive and sustained interactions across groups is critical in reducing stereotypes and negative biases toward diverse peers. Additionally, our research on urban middle schools demonstrates that greater ethnic diversity (i.e., multiple ethnic groups relatively similar in size) is associated with students feeling safer, less bullied, and less lonely (Juvonen, Kogachi, & Graham, 2018; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). We presume that in settings with high levels of diversity, it is easier for all students to “fit in.” Hence, they feel less socially vulnerable. One question is whether the ethnic diversity findings replicate across other types of diversity. Thus far, we have extended our analyses to study school-based *body weight diversity* and academic performance. Although youth with higher body weight are likely to be marginalized and mistreated by their peers (Puhl & Latner, 2007) as well as at heightened risk for academic difficulties (e.g., Crosnoe, 2007), we find that weight is unrelated to achievement scores in schools with greater variation in body weight (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019a). These findings suggest that greater exposure to diverse body shapes and sizes functions as a stigma-reduction mechanism that, in turn, reduces weight-based

achievement disparities. Taken together, there are multiple reasons to maximize the overall diversity of the student body.

Our research on ethnic diversity also suggests that students are sensitive to possible structural biases related to numerical representation. When considering whether the ethnic diversity of their classes reflects the overall school composition, we found that the positive effects of school level diversity on outgroup attitudes and teachers' fair treatment no longer held when students were enrolled in classes *less* diverse than their schools (as may be the case when academic tracking is utilized; Juvonen, Kogachi, et al., 2018). These findings suggest how greater overall diversity is maximally beneficial when it reflects equitable practices. Therefore, schools need to carefully monitor the equitable access and the fairness of their practices across groups.

In schools with less overall diversity, it is particularly important to be sensitive to the classroom placement of youth with potentially stigmatized identities or attributes (e.g., proportion of students of any ethnic minority group, students with special needs). As mentioned earlier, when the representation of any one groups is very low in a classroom, students from that group likely face greater challenge to be socially accepted by classmates. Also, a recent review (DuPont-Reyes & Villatoro, 2019) suggests that ethnic minority students have fewer mental health problems when their group is larger. Monitoring the relative representation of any one group at a time is relevant when considering whether students are fairly distributed across classes (e.g., in advanced and remedial classes), relative to their overall size within a school (Moore & Slate, 2008). Such assessments can highlight important inequalities in access that affect students' sense of inclusion. Similarly, school administrators need to monitor whether students of different

ethnic groups, genders, language backgrounds, and SES groups are disproportionately disciplined.

Identifying disparities is the first step in targeting the source of those disparities. In some cases, policies and processes for course enrollment, referrals for special education, and disciplinary strategies may need to be questioned and changed. In other cases, the issue may not be policy, but rather professional development. Professional development is especially critical when certain types of disparities are difficult to measure. For example, although sexual minority youth—particularly girls—appear to receive disproportionate disciplinary referrals (Mittleman, 2018), information on students' sexual orientation is unlikely to be available to schools. Given that sexual orientation is rarely addressed in teacher education (Jennings, 2007), teachers are less likely to be aware of such disciplinary biases. Hence, it is vital that both administrators and teachers are sensitive to students' social identities and attributes that bias reactions of not only peers, but also those of teachers.

#### **4.2 Increase Teacher Awareness and Use of Inclusive Strategies**

Beyond assisting school administrators to better understand, monitor, and facilitate greater numerical representation across settings, and increasing teacher sensitivities to negative biases, instructors are also in a position to facilitate optimal conditions for contact between their students: i.e., to foster cooperation, promote equal status, and support positive cross-group interactions (Allport, 1954). One of the best-documented instructional methods to facilitate inclusion involves cooperative learning.

Relative to competitive or individualistic classroom goal structures, *cooperative practices* are associated with greater acceptance, liking, support, and caring interactions among classmates (Roseth et al., 2008). Cooperative learning methods, including jigsaw and other group-based

activities, require input from all group members to make progress toward a common goal, in order to achieve individual and group success (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2013; van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). When teachers strategically group students, they capitalize on positive interdependence to improve intergroup relations and inclusion. Cooperative learning is robustly associated with the formation of cross-group friendships across gender, ethnicity, SES, and ability status (Slavin, 1995). Such positive findings partly reflect perspective taking (Ziegler, 1981)—one key element assumed to contribute to prejudice reduction. Further, in addition to helping lower prejudice across groups, cooperative learning has been shown to reduce bullying behaviors, peer victimization experiences, and perceived stress among marginalized students in middle school (van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018).

One challenge in effectively promoting inclusion through cooperative learning is forming working groups that break down homophily but avoid creating negative intergroup interactions. Imposing contact between students who belong to different friend groups can exacerbate perceived differences (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009). To be able to create effective learning groups, teachers must therefore be highly aware of the social dynamics among their students; yet, accurate understanding of classroom social dynamics can be difficult to attain. For example, teachers' perceptions of who in their classes acts aggressively toward others are easily biased by their perceptions of students' popularity, athleticism, or distress symptoms (Dawes et al., 2017). Thus, cooperative learning is potentially a highly effective tool to promote both academic and social outcomes, but it needs to be used with careful and continued monitoring of group dynamics.

Sensitive *awareness of social dynamics* can be utilized to manipulate the classroom social structure beyond the use of cooperative learning as well. If teachers are aware of patterns of



friendship, bullying and victimization, and so forth, they may be able to provide individualized attention and structure classrooms in ways that make social status less relevant or reduce disparities in status. For example, they might provide aggressive children with positive classroom roles, or foster opportunities to form friendships among students who are isolated or marginalized—strategies which in turn improve students’ sense of community with peers (Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, & Rodkin, 2014). These concepts of teacher attunement and management of social dynamics, discussed by Farmer et al. (2019, this issue), provide a framework through which teachers can promote social inclusion in their classrooms in a manner integrated with their regular daily activities.

In addition to structuring their classrooms strategically, teachers and school staff have a critical role in *modeling inclusive behaviors*. Teachers’ attitudes toward students can be seen reflected in peer relations. For example, a recent study shows how teachers’ liking of particular students predicts subsequent peer inclusion, which then in turn predicts academic achievement in upper elementary school (Sette, Gasser, & Grütter, 2019). Also, teachers’ use of inclusive language is important. Earlier we discussed how referring to groups as “boys and girls” reinforces gender categories as important distinctions (e.g., Hilliard & Liben, 2010). If instead teachers rely on neutral language (e.g., refer to “students”), they do not draw attention to gender categories and therefore do not exacerbate existing divisions between boys and girls. Gender neutral language is particularly important in that it does not exclude youth who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, gender fluid, etc. Likewise, teachers can model use of correct pronouns for their gender minority students. Leading the class in using transgender and nonbinary youths’ chosen names may reduce those students’ depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Russell, Pollitt, Li, & Grossman, 2018).

In some cases, modeling of inclusive practices may not be enough and direct interventions are needed. For example, sexual and gender minority youth experience high rates of victimization and verbal harassment from peers as well as adults at school, and they also report school personnel rarely intervening (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Lack of teacher intervention frequently reflects inadequate training. For example, lack of knowledge is a barrier for instructors to support sexual and gender minority students: over half of surveyed teachers say that they do not know how or when to intervene in harassment situations, while over a third cite lack of administrative support as a barrier (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Such findings reinforce an important issue: when the weight of promoting inclusion falls on teachers, they must receive both training and administrative support.

#### **4.3 Promote Shared Goals Outside Classroom Context**

In addition to teachers' awareness and in-class activities that promote social inclusion, there are a number of ways that activities outside of the classroom can be used to foster connections between students across different groups. Extracurricular activities—particularly those that attract students across groups—as well as alliances or inclusion-oriented clubs that are specifically designed to bridge across groups and help all students connect with peers.

*Extracurricular activities*, such as sports and performing arts, provide an ideal context for promoting positive interdependence and peer relations within schools. Youth often select which clubs or activities they wish to join based on shared interests, making them ideal for promoting friendship formation through increased proximity and awareness of similar interests. Extracurricular activities that explicitly encourage, or require, peer collaboration (e.g., team sports, drama, chorus, or orchestra) provide particularly important opportunities for youth to work together toward common goals (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2013). Hence, activity involvement

that relies on joint effort is especially likely to facilitate positive peer interactions and friendships.

In addition to promoting friendship in general, extracurricular activities can facilitate more positive intergroup relations (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2013; Knifsend & Juvonen, 2017). For example, when White high school athletes have a greater proportion of Black teammates, they express more positive intergroup attitudes toward Black Americans in general (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manuel, 2003). Based on a wide range of activities in ethnically diverse middle schools, we find that cross-ethnic friendships in extracurricular activities mediate, in part, the positive association between general cross-ethnic contact in extracurricular activities, and attitudes toward ethnic outgroups (Knifsend & Juvonen, 2017). Research is scarce on extracurricular activities and intergroup relations related to identities other than race or ethnicity. However, theoretically, this type of positive impact should generalize to other identities as long as activities attract diverse students. Youth with overweight, for example, experience low acceptance from peers, but become increasingly accepted over time if they are involved in extracurricular programs (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005).

To achieve positive intergroup benefits through extracurricular activities, various groups of students need *equal access*. For example, low-income students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities compared to their peers from wealthier homes (Pedersen & Seidman, 2005), particularly if they live farther away from their school (Malacarne, 2017). Steps such as providing transportation (e.g., bus passes if public transportation is available) and limiting out-of-pocket expenses (e.g., engaging in group fundraising activities for necessary materials) are critical to equalize access. Access may also be affected by policies (e.g., tryouts for competitive activities or gender-segregated sport teams) as well as social norms. For example, dancing tends

to be a gendered activity, with boys who participate often being subjected to ridicule from peers (Risner, 2014). Similarly, students of different ethnic backgrounds may feel that they will be less welcome in certain athletic activities (Bopp, Turick, Vadeboncoeur, & Aicher, 2017). Students with overweight, in turn, are deterred from physically active extracurricular activities due to high rates of teasing (Puhl et al., 2011). Finally, students with special needs have low participation rates in extracurricular activities (Agran et al., 2017). One reason for their under-engagement is that they may need more support (i.e., more explicit instruction and a high level of structure) to engage in these activities alongside students without disabilities (Strand & Kreiner, 2005). Thus, school personnel must be vigilant about a range of obstacles that prevent students from joining particular groups, and remove these obstacles when possible.

Schools can facilitate better intergroup relations by also promoting *inclusion-oriented clubs and alliances*. One strong example of a club with shared concern and agenda is gay-straight alliances (GSAs). They typically include both sexual and gender minority youth and students who are supportive of their sexual and gender minority peers. As such, GSAs provide safe spaces for sexual and gender minorities to find ingroup members as well as allies as they share a common goal of advocacy to address social inequalities based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Having a GSA in school recognizes sexual and gender minority students in an inclusive way that is educational for the general student body (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). Indeed, youth in schools with GSAs report greater belongingness (Toomey & Russell, 2013) and lower rates of health-compromising behaviors than youth in schools without GSAs (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013).

Some schools also have clubs geared toward increasing extracurricular and social opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) through *buddy*

*programs* (e.g., Best Buddies, <https://www.bestbuddies.org>). Such clubs can reduce the barriers for involvement of students with IDD, as noted by Strand and Kreiner (2005), by providing increased structure and support in the design of clubs and activities themselves. For example, “buddies” with and without IDD may be paired together, giving students ample time to learn and get to know one another through structured social activities designed with accessibility as a priority.

In addition to clubs and alliances designed to promote inclusion of particular groups, schools may have *peer mentoring programs* that pair, for example, older students with groups of younger mentees (e.g., 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students mentoring incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders) to ease the transition into a new school environment. Although the availability of independent program evaluations for such extracurricular activities is limited, their design is supported by theoretical principles of contact theory (Allport, 1954). In addition to such mentorship programs bridging across grade levels, groups of mentees can be constructed to be diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, social class, ability, and so forth. As such, these programs can bring students in contact with peers with whom they might not otherwise get the opportunity to interact. However, it should not be presumed that student mentors can facilitate positive interactions among their mentee groups without explicit training.

#### **4.4 Facilitate Cross-Group Friendships**

Pettigrew (1998) proposes that cross-group friendships—close mutual relationships between youth with different social identities, such as race and gender—are one of the most effective forms of contact to reduce prejudice because such relationships typically involve relatively equal status, shared goals, and cooperation. Indeed, a growing body of empirical evidence underscores cross-group friendships as an important social context for the development

of higher levels of intergroup sympathy and inclusive intentions (e.g., Grütter, Gasser, Zuffianò, & Meyer, 2018). Given that children in the same classrooms are more likely to become friends (George & Hartmann, 1996), it is critical that each class has as diverse a student body as possible. Although friendships are frequently formed based on shared social identities, such as gender and ethnicity, similar interests also increase friendship formation (McPherson et al., 2001). Indeed, when upper elementary school students in ethnically diverse schools are asked whether classmates of different ethnicities are likely to be friends, they focus on shared activities and interests (e.g., McGlothlin & Killen, 2005). Hence, providing opportunities for students to get to know one another better through shared activities in and out of class is critical to promote inclusion across groups.

Of all types of cross-group friendships, most is known about *cross-ethnic* relationships. A number of studies highlight the social-emotional and academic benefits of cross-ethnic friendships among school-aged youth. For example, students learn important perspective taking skills in the context of cross-ethnic friendships (cf. Antonio et al., 2004). In addition, cross-ethnic friendships predict higher end-of-year grades in academic classes and higher teacher expectations (Lewis et al., 2018). Cross-ethnic friendships are also associated with a less exclusionary school climate (Killen, Clark Kelly, Richardson, Crystal, & Ruck, 2010) and when school social norms support cross-ethnic relations, students show greater preference for cross-ethnic friends (Tropp, O'Brien, & Migacheva, 2014). Thus, while cross-ethnic friendships promote more inclusive school climate, relevant social norms also influence students' interest in forming and maintaining friendships with a schoolmate from another ethnic group.

Friendships bridging gender (Robnett & Leaper, 2013) and social class (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019b) are also associated with higher academic outcomes. Such findings imply that

cross-group friendships can function as social capital. Insofar as achievement disparities across socioeconomic status are accounted for by access to differential resources, difference-bridging friendships can help level the academic playing field. For example, when middle school students have even just one cross-class friend, achievement disparities based on parental level of education are significantly reduced (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019b). Functioning as an academic “equalizer,” cross-class friendships appear to increase students’ access to practical academic knowledge they may not get at home, such as insights on how to study effectively, and provide new enrichment opportunities as well as support for meeting academic challenges.

It should be noted that the benefits of cross-group friendships are not distributed uniformly across youth from all backgrounds. While the academic benefits of cross-class friendship come at no cost to the achievement of youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, the effects are particularly robust for lower-SES students (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019b), who frequently lack access to school-related resources (Coleman, 1988). There are similarly asymmetrical effects for cross-ethnic friendships, which function more effectively for members of dominant groups than for members of societally marginalized groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). That is, White youth who report friendships with ethnic minority peers experience a greater reduction in prejudice toward ethnic outgroups than do ethnic minority youth. One factor that may contribute to such an asymmetry is that the optimal conditions for contact are easier to meet from a higher status group individual’s perspective (Binder et al., 2009). For example, when considering equal status, White youth may more readily perceive themselves and their ethnic minority peers to be of equal status, or may not attend to status at all in intergroup interactions. The United States’ long history of racial inequality may be more salient to youth from groups that are more marginalized.

Although societal-level challenges are difficult for any one school to change, one way to prevent social segregation is to encourage friendships that persist over multiple school years with (ethnic) outgroup peers. Stable friendships are generally more influential upon youths' conduct than unstable ones (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999), and there is evidence that stable cross-ethnic friendships are especially effective at reducing prejudice as well (Rastogi & Juvonen, 2019). Creating a climate where stable cross-group friendships are encouraged may be especially critical in schools with little demographic diversity. If students can build and maintain friendships across group lines, despite having few peers available to befriend from a particular group, it is possible that such relationships are as effective as multiple, unstable ones at improving students' sense of connectedness and belonging with their peers. However, maintenance of cross-group friendships across time also requires contact outside of school (cf. Lessard, Kogachi, & Juvonen, 2019).

### **5. Intervention Approaches**

In an ideal world, all schools would include a diverse student body; incorporate cooperative, group-based learning; and create opportunities for students with different backgrounds and attributes to have positive interactions, thus fostering social inclusion. However, embedding such structural and instructional practices within schools is challenging, particularly in settings where there is already deep social segregation of students along group lines or when there are state or school district mandates restricting the flexibility of school organizational and instructional practices. In such cases, it may be necessary for schools to adopt intervention programs that directly target the school culture to promote a more inclusive environment for all students. This likely requires a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach that not only targets the attitudes and behaviors of students themselves, but also the practices of teachers



and administrators. Moreover, to adopt a curriculum typically requires time in the school schedule. Here we present some examples of relevant intervention approaches, review their “key ingredients,” and discuss the relevance of such programs for promoting inclusive school environments with some caveats.

### **5.1 Anti-Bias, Intergroup Contact, and Social Norm Interventions**

Most anti-bias programs explicitly educate youth about intergroup bias (Aboud & Levy, 2000), insofar as mere awareness of intergroup bias can promote students’ willingness to challenge inequities or the social mistreatment of “different” youth (Losinski et al., 2019). Anti-bias interventions can also capitalize on the principles of contact theory to foster interactions among students across group lines to improve intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Ideally, such interventions involve a face-to-face approach to facilitate cross-group friendships (e.g., cross-gender “buddy up” sessions, Fabes et al., 2019, this issue; Martin et al., 2017).

However, some schools have a restricted range of a particular types of diversity available. In such cases, more indirect approaches where course materials are modified to reflect cross-group relationships (e.g., books featuring friendships between disabled and nondisabled youth; Cameron & Rutland, 2006) may be utilized. Recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that such indirect approaches function as an effective prejudice reduction strategy (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015). In general, anti-bias programming can be effective when programs are designed under a dual identity model (González & Brown, 2003), whereby youth are encouraged to maintain a strong ingroup identity, while simultaneously increasing the salience of a broader, superordinate identity (e.g., the school community). Such indirect approaches may be used to increase exposure to diverse attributes as well as identities. For example, among elementary school

children, a puppet program teaching about acceptance of various body shapes has been shown effective in reducing negative attitudes and stereotypes about larger body shapes (Irving, 2000).

## **5.2 Multicultural Education**

To reduce prejudice toward ethnic groups, schools may also consider adopting multicultural curricula. Multicultural education focuses on increasing the representation of diverse narratives within the classroom, through the incorporation of the stories, music, holidays, and values of various social groups (Bigler, 1999). The purpose of multicultural education is two-fold; first it seeks to facilitate the integration of diverse youth into the school community, by giving equitable space to the experiences and histories of their unique social groups (Banks, 1995; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Second, multicultural education seeks to reduce prejudice by reducing ignorance. In other words, educating children and adolescents about the traditions, values, and contributions of various outgroups ought to increase positive attitudes toward those groups. However, such efforts can also backfire by promoting stereotypes and prejudice (Bigler, 1999). As a result, multicultural programs are not as effective as other prejudice reduction approaches (Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen, 2007). To increase their effectiveness, Aboud and Levy (2000) suggest pairing such curricula with an explicit endorsement of norms like tolerance and respect for diversity.

## **5.3 Social-Emotional Learning**

Another example of a promising intervention approach comes from the social-emotional learning domain. Programs teaching social-emotional learning take a strengths-based approach to cultivating students' capacity for empathy, social connection, and self-expression, with the ultimate goal of promoting students' ability to manage their emotions and work well with others (Jones, Kahn, & McGarrah, 2019; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). For

example, by equipping students with prosocial problem-solving skills and concrete conflict resolution strategies, teacher-administered social-emotional learning programs have achieved reductions in students' emotional distress and increases in their positive social behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Such interventions rely heavily on teachers to implement and monitor classroom activities. Thus, teacher training is a critical element of social-emotional programming. Ideally, such training would be provided during pre-service education even before teachers enter the classroom (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017). Developing teachers' own social-emotional skills and understanding is critical because teachers who feel high levels of efficacy in delivering the intervention, compared to those who feel burned out, are more likely to administer exercises with fidelity and in a high quality manner (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).

More recent social-emotional learning efforts have also focused specifically on promoting positive group dynamics among students. Such equity-focused iterations (see Jones et al., 2019) of the program explicitly introduce issues of power, prejudice, and discrimination (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018). For example, lessons on relationship skills may incorporate collaborative problem-solving exercises where students witness firsthand the value of incorporating diverse perspectives to develop creative solutions. Lessons on social awareness, in turn, can teach students about the ways that social and cultural norms affect the feelings and behaviors of those who do not "fit in." Insofar as teachers play a critical role in facilitating student cooperation and inclusion, recommendations have been made to incorporate new teacher training tools into social-emotional learning programs (Trach, Lee, & Hymel, 2018), such as "scouting reports" where teachers learn about the social dynamics of their classrooms (see Farmer et al., 2019, this issue). Teachers can then use such information

to make structural modifications through seating arrangements and integrating isolated students into group activities (Farmer et al., 2016).

#### **5.4 Social Norm Approaches to Modify Peer Culture**

Some interventions designed to promote more positive social dynamics in schools focus centrally on the role of collective social norms and capitalizing on influential students to initiate positive change (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016). These interventions are guided by the premise that many negative social behaviors in schools (e.g., bullying; harassment) stem from misperceptions of such behaviors being common or accepted. The goal of these interventions, in turn, is to encourage anti-conflict norms among students, so that students come to see aggression and harassment as deviant, rather than desirable. The programs operate bottom-up (as opposed to top-down), relying on students (not teachers) as agents of change (i.e., social referents). Small groups of students are assigned to an intervention where they are encouraged to publicly communicate their disapproval of conflict at school. In a recent evaluation (Paluck et al., 2016), intervention schools showed a 30% drop in disciplinary reports of student conflict across a one year period, compared with control schools (i.e., where no students received such intervention). Importantly, the intervention was most successful when the social referents--students who were randomly selected for the evaluation--were more centrally positioned in the peer group. Thus, by capitalizing on socially prominent students to publicly convey their stance against aggression and harassment, schools may be able to disrupt and transform problematic social norms.

Converging evidence also suggests that school-wide approaches to modify the peer culture are a critical element of school-wide *anti-bullying programs*. One program using such an approach is KiVa, a national anti-bullying program developed in Finland and funded through the

Finnish Ministry of Education (Kärnä et al., 2011). The program involves both preventative actions (i.e., to reduce bullying and improve school climate) as well as responsive actions (i.e., to promote the well-being of those who are bullied). Across these actions, a key focus of the program is on mobilizing bystanders to intervene when bullying occurs. For example, preventative actions include an anti-bullying computer game where students learn appropriate ways to respond to and intervene with bullying situations, whereas responsive actions include establishing teacher teams and peer mentors to support victims when bullying occurs at school. By involving both students and teachers in all elements of education and training, the program promotes a collective responsibility for treating others with respect and acceptance. Indeed, evidence from evaluations of KiVa in Finland suggest that the program not only effectively reduces rates of bullying, but also increases students' mental health and positive feelings about school (Kärnä et al., 2011). The positive effects suggest that increasing youth's sense of accountability to help one another may be one pathway towards reinforcing norms of inclusiveness and social acceptance. Schools characterized by more prosocial behavioral norms are likely to not only promote the collective well-being of all youth, but to also serve a protective function among students experiencing high levels of social vulnerability, such as those who are bullied and friendless (Schacter & Juvonen, 2018).

It is also critical that anti-bullying and anti-discrimination programs continue to develop with an eye towards issues of inclusion, equity, and bias. Recent calls for a *developmental intergroup approach* to bullying and discrimination provide a helpful theoretical framework for moving forward in this domain (Palmer & Abbott, 2018). This particular perspective emphasizes that the way children and adolescents respond to bullying, for example, is not only shaped by their general empathy and ability to perspective-take, but also by their perceived similarity to the

victim (or bully) and the broader social norms in their school. Thus, programs that were initially designed to address explicit forms of exclusion (i.e., bullying in general vs. identity-based discrimination or harassment) may need to more substantially overlap to address the range of motivations underlying all forms of exclusion in schools.

### **5.5 Summary**

Taken together, there are ways for schools to address negative bias and social exclusion explicitly, regardless of the student composition by relying on anti-bias and intergroup contact, and social norm interventions. We reviewed some evidence-based approaches. All of these require commitment and buy-in from educators, training of teachers, fidelity of implementation as well as time in the school schedule. As such, such programs by no means provide easy solutions to reduce exclusion.

## **6. Conclusions and Future Directions**

In the current review, we contend that school administrators and teachers play critical roles in reducing exclusion and promoting inclusion in all schools. Even in racially or socioeconomically segregated neighborhoods, each school has some variability in the student body. However, based on the above review, it is also clear that diversity does not automatically promote social inclusion (cf. Brown & Juvonen, 2018). Rather, school administrators and educators need to create conditions that are safe and accepting for all students. As suggested in our proactive inclusion model (Figure 1), school personnel must strategically monitor the “who” (i.e., the student body) as well as the “how” (i.e., school organizational and instructional practices) to achieve inclusion. Teachers need to be educated about social processes and group dynamics so they can rely on proactive strategies to unite students of various backgrounds and

attributes. They also need ongoing support to prevent and handle situations involving peer victimization, rejection, and isolation.

Too frequently school administrators and instructors consider social acceptance by peers as a bonus, not as a necessity. That is, many educators see schools' primary responsibility to teach students the three R's (Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic). Yet students' social experiences with their peers can either promote or deter them from learning the three Rs. When students do not feel safe or feel that they "fit in," they are not ready to engage and ready to learn. Their ability to focus on academic tasks is easily compromised when they are concerned about, or distressed because of, the ways they are treated by their peers. In contrast, when students have good friends in school, when they get to work together on joint projects or shared activities, they are highly engaged and like school (Wentzel et al., 2018). We propose that with the empirical evidence, a fourth R is needed: learning how to relate to others in accepting ways (see also Jones et al., 2019). The ability to relate to and get along with different individuals are skills that cannot be easily taught like the other Rs, yet they are critical in preparation for life after school (Nishina et al., 2019, this issue).

If schools are truly committed to diversity and inclusion, teachers' roles and responsibilities need to be redefined in light of the fourth R. We made a case that instructors need to proactively model socially inclusive behaviors, rely on practices that unite students with shared goals and activities, as well as manage situations when students are victimized, rejected, or lack friends. For example, it is important that teachers use gender inclusive language as well as know how to intervene in ways that do not further stigmatize a transgender or sexual minority student. It is clear that explicit professional development is needed as most teachers report lacking the knowledge, training, and skills to support sexual and gender minority students and

over half say that they do not know how or when to intervene in harassment situations (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). It is unreasonable to presume that such situations are handled well proactively *or* reactively without training and support. As teachers are on the “front line,” schools and districts must provide professional training for them to be able to meet goals for social inclusion. To expect that inclusion happens organically is simply unrealistic and therefore explicit teacher education is needed both at pre-and in-service phases.

There is a relatively new body of research on teacher attunement highlighting the need for instructors to be sensitive to peer relationships and group dynamics within their classrooms (e.g., Farmer et al., 2019, this issue; Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011; Gest et al., 2014; Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2011). Such social attunement is probably the most overlooked aspect of teacher education programs. Although teacher education covers “classroom management,” this rubric includes mainly discipline issues and methods. Similarly, many of the school-based interventions are reactive rather than proactive—i.e., addressing a problem (e.g., bullying, discrimination) once it has become an issue (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Proactive curricular (e.g., social-emotional learning), in turn are hard to fit in among learning objectives that are formally evaluated to assess both student and teacher competencies. To offer a solution, we propose that many inclusive educational practices can function as “built-in” preventions. By fostering conditions for optimal contact (e.g., through peer collaboration), teachers can help unite students across race, class, gender as well as sexual orientation, disability status, and other types of stigmatizing attributes.

For the current review we purposefully approached diversity broadly to be able to identify general conceptual issues pertaining to social inclusion across a range of student social identities and attributes. This means that we have not done justice to differences between



ethnicity and social class or sexual orientation and disabilities, etc. Neither have we dealt with important questions regarding intersectionality. For example, undoubtedly the exclusion experiences of a low-income immigrant gay Latino student are different from those of a White gay boy from a wealthy home. There are important differences across various social identities and attributes and the intersections of each that deserve much more nuanced analysis. Although practices that facilitate social inclusion of a specific group might not generalize to other types of differences, cooperation and shared goals might work equally well to facilitate all sorts of cross-group interactions and relationships. It is not a coincidence that the next three papers (i.e., Fabes et al., 2019, this issue; Farmer et al., 2019, this issue; and Nishina et al., 2019, this issue) all discuss cooperative learning methods as a way to promote inclusion.

To gain insights into which practices work with which types of diverse students, it is imperative that researchers and schools (e.g., educators, school administrators) collaborate with one another. While theories and conceptual analyses help us think about the bigger picture of general challenges and opportunities for social inclusion, school administrators and instructors have important insights and questions that can lead to important research (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Participatory action research would be a particularly suitable way to build the scientific knowledge from hereon. Approaching administrators, teachers as well as students and asking them to define the problems in their communities allows researchers to gain familiarity with the particular histories and dynamics of that community (Macaulay et al., 1999). Such an approach is particularly critical as shared insights are likely to lead to a better understanding of how to most effectively intervene. Moreover, through collaborations with researchers, school personnel may also learn a variety of practical and transferable skills that can be applied to problem-solve and evaluate school- or district-level policies and programs in the future. In short,

participatory action research is a framework which can be used to tailor research to the needs of a given school or district, while the insights from the “front lines” in turn inform the further development of strategies that promote social inclusion.

Additionally, basic research needs to be conducted to better understand the underlying processes that help account for the academic difficulties of marginalized groups. For example, studies that examine the effects of social exclusion on attention seem promising. Experimentally induced social exclusion has been found to lead to deficits in working memory (Hawes et al., 2012). Given that executive functioning predicts academic achievement (e.g., Best, Miller, & Naglieri, 2011), it stands to reason that exclusion and related attentional problems may exacerbate achievement disparities caused by inequitable school practices. For example, Gibbons, O'Hara, Stock, Gerrard, Weng, & Wills (2012) showed that discriminatory experiences of African-American adolescents increased anger and impulsivity. Another study shows how girls' experience of gender discrimination by middle school staff predicts increased depression and decreased sleep (Bell & Juvonen, 2019). Sleep deprivation as well as poor quality sleep, in turn are related to increased threat and anxiety (Talbot, McGlinchey, Kaplan, Dahl, & Harvey, 2010) and lower academic performance (Dewald, Meijer, Oort, Kerkhof, & Bögels, (2010). Thus, experiences of biased treatment can affect achievement through various cognitive, affective, and physiological (see Schonert-Reichl, 2019) pathways that warrant further study.

It is also important to consider whether any one type of diversity or strategy to promote greater inclusion of one particular marginalized group may improve inclusion of other marginalized groups. For example, can GSAs foster an inclusive school climate where students with overweight or disabilities are more accepted? While studies indicate that students, on average, are fare better off in schools with GSAs than in schools without GSAs (Poteat et al.,

2013; Toomey & Russell, 2013), it remains unknown whether the effects are stronger for students with other marginalized identities and attributes (e.g., racial minorities, students with disabilities, etc.). There is at least one study suggesting that one type of school-based diversity can protect youth with other stigmatizing attributes: Lanza, Echols, and Graham (2018) showed that greater ethnic diversity lowered the risk of peer victimization of middle school students with high body weight. It is possible that in ethnically diverse schools appearance norms are more variable or less rigid, thereby resulting in lower weight “policing” by peers. To be able to examine the effects of the generalizability of any one way to foster inclusion across multiple marginalized groups, it is vital that researchers who study gender segregation, social exclusion of students with special needs, ethnic minority or immigrant youth, sexual and gender minority adolescents, children with overweight, etc. learn about one another’s insights and find common ground. The collective insight and the conceptually consistent findings offer a strong scientific rationale to reform educational practices.

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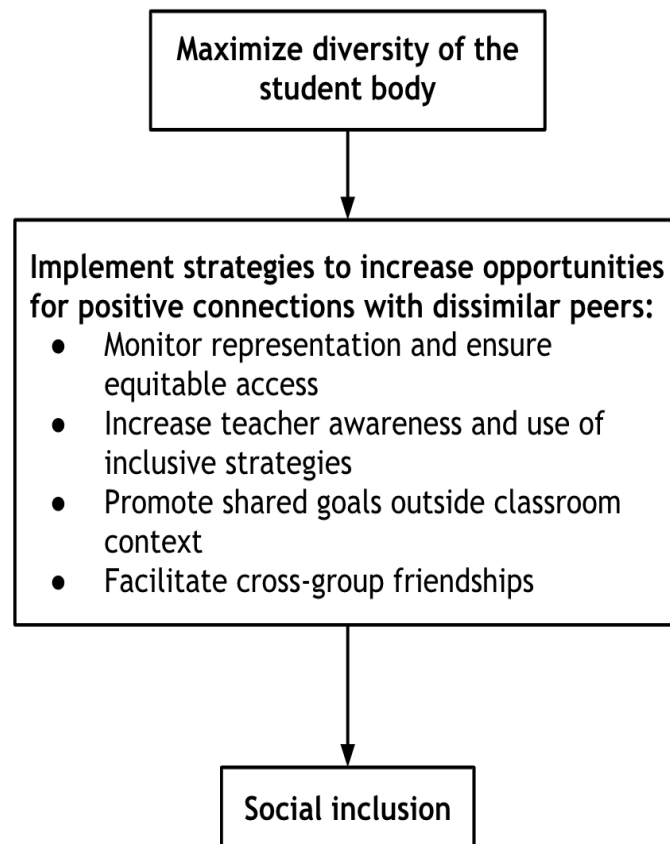
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**Figure 1. Proactive approaches for schools to promote social inclusion**