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(2022)

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International Journal of Inclusive Education, 26(5), pp. 429-447.

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *International Journal of Inclusive Education* on 4 December 2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13603116.2019.1698061>

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1698061>

Young children's moral evaluations of inclusion and exclusion in play in ethnic and aggressive stereotypic peer contexts

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Abstract

Previous research has emphasised the importance of active citizenship in the early years for the development of tolerant and cohesive societies. This paper reports data from 174 children, aged 6-7 years, who were interviewed in the first year of a longitudinal study. Children were presented with two scenarios about inclusion of others in play. One scenario focussed on a peer from a different ethnic background and the other scenario was about a peer who was aggressive to others. Children were asked about their reasons to include or exclude the other child. Children were more likely to include the peer from a different ethnic background than the aggressive peer and cited moral or prosocial reasons. Children were also asked if they would still include or exclude, if friends or teachers disagreed with their decision. Most children maintained their original judgement in the face of contrary views by their peers but were more likely to change their opinion if a teacher disagreed. The implications of these findings for teachers in early childhood education are discussed with a focus on understanding contextual influences on children's moral judgements and how children come to value diverse perspectives.

Keywords: Moral development; Early Childhood; Social Inclusion; Social Cognition; Stereotypes

Introduction

In recent years, issues related to citizenship education and values for democracy have been emphasised in educational policies and there is a strong interest in values education, democracy in schools and children's rights from an international perspective (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2017). In Australia, the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools (NFVE), sets out the values seen to be important within the Australian school context. These values are care and

compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility and understanding, tolerance and inclusion (NFVE 2005, p. 3). However, the Australian curriculum for the early years of school has no specific statements with respect to values education or citizenship (Authors, 2011) and the early years have been neglected in Australian research about active citizenship (Authors, 2017a). As social exclusion of children is an important challenge to Australian society in promoting children as moral active citizens, this paper contributes to understanding Australian children's perspectives and the way in which they reason about social and moral values.

This paper contributes new knowledge by identifying how young Australian children make decisions regarding social exclusion. To do so we draw on findings from a project that investigated the moral and social judgements young children made about including and excluding others in play at school. As prejudice emerges relatively early in childhood it is important to understand children's perceptions in order to promote moral integrity, tolerance, justice and equity in the early years of school (Killen et al. 2011; Killen, Mulvey, and Hitti 2013; Rutland and Killen 2015). The study findings can provide insights into young children's thinking about social exclusion. This research may then be able to inform teachers about ways in which children's moral reasoning for social inclusion can be promoted and exclusion prevented.

Children's moral reasoning about inclusion and exclusion in play

Over the years there has been a shift in research related to moral reasoning from the earlier work of Piaget's (1932) developmental approach to morality (cognitive and social capacities) and Kohlberg's (1984) foundational stage model of development to a focus on children's social cognition. Within a social-cognitive framework, social domain theory has informed research on moral development in childhood (Killen 2007). From this perspective, children's

evaluations of transgressions (e.g., contravention of a moral code) can reflect a consideration of the psychological domain (autonomy, personal choice and personal identity), the societal domain (social-conventional concerns and customs) or the moral domain (fairness, justice and rights). These judgments across domains reflect personal considerations, social-conventional expectations and moral considerations respectively. Children's decisions to include or exclude a peer involve complex reasoning within these judgement domains.

Exclusion occurs at many levels and in many contexts from interpersonal exclusion to intergroup exclusion, reflecting different types of intentions and goals (Rutland and Killen 2015). The exclusion of children based upon *group characteristics* such as ethnic background can be referred to as intergroup exclusion (Killen 2007). As noted by Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin and Stangor (2002), this type of exclusion reflects prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and bias as well as judgements on fairness, equality and rights. In this way, children's moral reasoning influences how they engage in social inclusion on the basis of gender, race, or ethnic background (Authors, 2017a; Mulvey, Hitti, and Killen 2010).

Exclusion may also be based on individual *behavioral traits*, which can be referred to as interpersonal exclusion. This occurs, for example, when someone is excluded because they are aggressive (Rutland and Killen 2015).

We know that children exhibit complex forms of moral and social reasoning as they balance information about morality with information about group loyalty and norms when making social decisions about inclusion and exclusion (Killen, Mulvey, and Hitti 2013). In our previous work, children's responses to scenarios regarding inclusion or exclusion of an aggressive child (who is bossy and pushes others) in their play at school demonstrated that they were more likely to include an aggressive child in their play in Grade 2 than in Grade 1 of elementary school (Authors, 2017). We also found that Grade 2 students were more likely than Grade 1 students to provide justifications that demonstrated a deeper understanding of

the reasons for children's aggressive behaviour at school. We also found that children's school experiences may contribute to their ability to access multiple perspectives when reasoning about the inclusion of others. This paper contributes new knowledge by identifying how young Australian children make decisions regarding interpersonal exclusion based on individual disposition (e.g., aggression) and group identity (e.g., ethnic background). On the one hand, individual dispositions lead to social rejection while on the other, the focus is on the role of normative expectations with respect to group identity in the emergence of prejudice and group-based biases (Rutland and Killen 2015). Specifically, in this paper we focus on two domains; *ethnic background* (group membership) and *aggressive behavioral characteristics* (individual), to explore children's reasoning about inclusion and exclusion of diverse others. Additionally, our findings offer insights into children's moral evaluations when they are faced with opposing views regarding their decision to include or exclude by their peers and teachers.

Ethnic Background

We were interested in social inclusion/exclusion on the basis of ethnic background (Mulvey, Hitti, and Killen 2010) as this focus provides a way in which to explore children's moral and social reasoning. The development of prejudice and social exclusion is related to the emergence of important social-cognitive abilities (e.g., moral reasoning and social perspective taking) and understanding of group identity, group norms, and group dynamics (Rutland and Killen 2015). Recent research has focused on children's social exclusion and prejudice when an intergroup context exists with opposing group identities, such as children living in ethnically heterogeneous communities who are excluded from an ethnically diverse peer group because of their ethnic-group membership (Rutland and Killen 2015). While little is known about younger children's perspectives, from middle childhood, group identity and

group dynamics becomes a powerful and salient dimension when children reason about the legitimacy of social exclusion and prejudice in intergroup contexts (Levy and Killen 2008).

A focus on exclusion based on ethnic background is particularly appropriate in an Australian context given the ethnically diverse nature of the Australian population and history of problematic relationships between the dominant Anglo-Australian population and both Indigenous peoples and immigrants. Previous research with elementary school children in Australia, has indicated that Anglo-Australian children rate members of their own ethnic group more positively than they rate children from other ethnic groups (Pacific Islanders and Indigenous children) with Indigenous children receiving the lowest rating of all (Griffiths and Nesdale, 2006). These findings reflect similar findings from North American research which has indicated that by 6-8 years of age, children show greater positivity to others from a similar ethnic background than to those from different ethnic groups (see Nesdale, 2001 for a review).

Developmental studies have found that children showing higher identification with their ethnic group tend to show stronger preferences for those that share their ethnicity over others, and favour children within their group that show loyalty to the group (Abrams, Rutland, and Cameron 2003; Rutland and Killen 2015). However, the promotion of a common group identity (e.g., a shared nationality or school identity) rather than exclusive group identity (e.g., only identification with being either an ethnic majority or minority) can reduce children's bias against those from another ethnic group (Cameron and Rutland 2008; Rutland and Killen 2015). Providing experiences for children to enhance their sense of belonging within an educational setting that identifies common values and is explicitly inclusive of all children is one way to encourage common group identity, providing a broader framework in which children's personal identities can be recognised and reasoning about social inclusion promoted. Students of different ethnic backgrounds can have a strong sense of attachment to

shared values (Blum 2014) and facilitating such common identity in schools can promote reasoning about social inclusion.

Aggressive behavioural characteristics

Social inclusion/exclusion based on behavioral traits, such as aggression, is another way in which to explore children's moral reasoning. Aggression is a particularly important focus given the large body of literature exploring the correlates of peer acceptance which has demonstrated that children who display aggressive behaviour are likely to be rejected by their peers (see e.g., Coie, Dodge and Kupersmidt, 1990; Dekovic and Gerris, 1994; Newcomb, Bukowski and Pattee, 1993; Warden and Mackinnon, 2003). Occurring at an early age, children tend to form friendships with peers who share characteristics associated with age, gender, and cultural background, as well as behaviours and activities, with similarities in behaviour, such as aggression. (Nipedal, Nesdale, and Killen 2010). For example, Duffy and Nesdale (2009) found that naturalistic groups of children in middle childhood that displayed the most aggression and bullying had group norms that endorsed this behaviour. In contrast, groups of children that did not display aggressive behaviour had group norms that did not endorse this behaviour. From this perspective, when children have group norms that directly or indirectly endorse such behaviours, children will tend to follow the group norm (Nipedal, Nesdale, and Killen 2010).

Schools have responded to incidents of aggression by implementing rules associated with appropriate behaviour. Mandates not to engage in such behaviours may conflict with children's established group norms. However, children have an increasing awareness that negative attitudes and behaviours, such as intergroup prejudice, aggression, and bullying, are considered to be unacceptable and inappropriate by teachers in school contexts (Rutland et al. 2005). Schools, then, defined by rules, provide protocols and procedures about what is acceptable behaviour. That is, children in the first years of schooling come to know school

rules, protocols and procedures that influence ways of socialisation and define themselves as students (Authors 2017b; Thornberg 2008). Such school expectations can be internalised and influence how a child reasons about traits such as aggression within educational contexts.

The Current Study

Reasoning about exclusion is complex and requires children to coordinate thinking about rights and fairness (moral domain) with decisions about personal choice and social conventions (Killen 2007). Previous research has suggested that children can differentiate between moral imperatives, which protect people's rights and social conventional rules which are customs determined only by consensus (Smetana and Braeges 1990; Turiel 1983). Even very young children view moral transgressions as more generalisably wrong than flouting social conventions (Wainryb et al. 2005). Social exclusion based upon prejudice is experienced by children from an early age and has important consequences on psychological development (Killen and Rutland 2011). As prejudice and discrimination observed in adults originates in childhood it is important to understand how prejudice evolves and what factors enable or constrain social exclusion. Killen and her colleagues (Killen 2007; Killen and Stangor 2001) have demonstrated that children's evaluations of exclusion based on group membership are associated with the type of social reasoning that they use. Given that the early years of school are a crucial time for the development of children's moral reasoning, and a time that that development can be influenced by others, it is important that we understand children's moral evaluations. So too, stereotypes are more likely to be activated in complex social situations (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Validzic 1998), such as in school contexts, therefore understanding children's reasoning about exclusion and inclusion is vital if effective interventions are to be implemented. The current study aimed to explore how children in the early years of school in Australia reasoned about whether to include or

exclude another child in their play in the contexts of social inclusion of a child from a different ethnicity and social inclusion of a child displaying aggressive behaviour.

The specific research questions were:

- How do 6-7-year old Australian children reason about inclusion and exclusion based on behaviour and ethnicity?
- Do children view social consensus or authority influence as legitimate reasons to change their mind about whether to include or exclude based on behaviour and ethnicity?
- How do children justify their decisions to include or exclude based on behaviour and ethnicity?

Method

Drawing on child interview data from the first year of a longitudinal study, this paper considers the complexities involved for children aged 6-7 years, and their reasoning about inclusion or exclusion of peers at school. The current study investigates children's decision making based on *group characteristics* such as ethnic background and *behavioural traits* such as aggressive behaviour. In addition, two important sources of external influence on children's decision making around inclusion or exclusion have been shown to be social consensus and authority influence (Killen et al. 2002). Social consensus, defined as peer influence, appears to be particularly important with respect to peer exclusion (Killen et al. 2002) and was assessed by asking children whether they would change their minds to include or exclude if their peers said that they should to determine whether children saw social consensus as a legitimate reason to change their mind about inclusion. We also assessed the legitimacy of authority influence on determining whether exclusion might be okay by asking

children whether they would change their initial judgement if their teacher said that they should. While prior research provides insights into children's moral reasoning, it focuses on older children and is located outside of the Australian context. The aim of our research is to contribute nuanced understandings of children's moral evaluations by focusing on (i) the Australian context – “a fast changing, ever expanding, culturally diverse nation” (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017), (ii) children who are younger in age than prior research, and (iii) whether children change their mind about their decision to include or exclude when they face contrary views by peers and teachers. Findings can inform school interventions aiming to reduce social exclusion in the early years.

Participants and setting

Interviews were conducted with 178 participants (91 boys, 87 girls) who were 6-7 years of age ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 0.32$) and in Grade 1 at ten independent ($n=4$) and state ($n=6$) primary schools in south east Queensland, Australia. The 10 schools were located in suburbs that are ethnically diverse and represent populations with places of birth from 51-85 countries (SBS 2018). In Queensland, Grade 1 follows the preparatory year (Prep) and is considered the second year of formal schooling. Permission to conduct the study was granted by principals, teachers, parents/ guardians and children prior to data collection. Written consent was obtained from the teachers and parents (or guardians), while children were asked to express their willingness to participate by colouring in a smiley face or alternatively, a frowning face if they did not wish to take part.

Data collection

Interviews with the children were conducted one-on-one with a single researcher. The interviews, lasting approximately twenty minutes, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed. As part of the study, extensive interview training with research assistants was led by the key researcher prior to data collection. The research assistants had a background in early

childhood education, were experienced in qualitative research methods through their postgraduate studies, and either held or were a considerable way through completing a PhD in education. The interviews took place in a familiar setting in the school. Interviewers (including research assistants & researchers) were aware of the need to make children feel comfortable and engaged in casual discussions before conducting the interview. During the interview, children were presented with two scenarios (adapted from Killen et al., 2002) in which they had to make a decision about whether to include a child of a different ethnic background or to include a child who is aggressive in their play. The modifications to Killen et al's (2002) work involved making the scenarios more appropriate to the Australian cultural context and to the younger age group of the children interviewed and were developed for the current study's focus on different ethnic backgrounds and children's aggressive behaviours. The scenarios were:

1. "Michael is in Grade 1. Jack is a new boy in the class. Jack seems very bossy and pushes other kids around. Jack wants to make friends with Michael and asks Michael to play with him at lunch time. Michael does not want to play with Jack because he pushes other kids around."
 - Do you think Michael should play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes other kids around?
 - Why do you think he should/should not?"
 - What if Michael's friends said he should/shouldn't play with Jack. Do you think he should/shouldn't play with him then?
 - What if Michael's teacher said he should/shouldn't play with Jack. Do you think he should/shouldn't play with him then?

2. “James is in Year 1 at school. Zui is a new boy in class. Zui wants to make new friends so at lunch time he asks James if he wants to play. James doesn’t want to play with Zui because he speaks a different language and comes from a different country.”
- Do you think James should play with Zui even though he speaks a different language and comes from a different country?
 - Why do you think he should/should not?”
 - What if James’ friends said he should/shouldn’t play with Zui. Do you think he should/shouldn’t play with him then?
 - What if James’ teacher said he should/shouldn’t play with Zui. Do you think he should/shouldn’t play with him then?

After each scenario was presented, the children were asked whether or not the child should be included and to provide a justification for their decision. Additionally, children were asked if they would still include or exclude, if friends (social consensus) or teachers (authority) disagreed.

Analysis

The work of Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin and Stagnor (2002) informed two steps in the data analysis process as follows. In Step 1, we used the code of 0 to record responses that reflected inclusion (e.g., child believes that Jack or Zui should be included in their play) while a code of 1 reflected exclusion (see Killen et al., 2002). In Step 2, children’s justifications for inclusion or exclusion were coded deductively and inductively using adapted categories of description from the work of Killen et al., (2002) and previous research (e.g., Authors 2017b; Authors, 2017c). This approach to data analysis reflects a process known as template analysis in which the main categories or themes are developed using existing literature and prior research (deductive coding) and adapted during the process of analysis (inductive coding)

(King 2004). Table 1 provides a summary of the template that was developed and applied to the children's responses. The categories included moral justifications (prosocial/empathy; inclusion/fairness), psychological justifications (personal choice; play is conditional) and socio-conventional justifications (group functioning).

A team of research assistants and researchers participated in the data analysis process. To ensure consistency of coding, two strategies were used. First, the research assistants were engaged in extensive training with a researcher by reading a small number of transcripts using the Killen et al. (2002) categories. This initial template was then adapted as discussions proceeded about the suitability of the categories to reflect the data emerging from the children's transcripts. The research assistants and the researcher then individually applied the final template to three interview transcripts and compared coding. At this point, the template provided a good representation of the children's responses. Also, the research assistants and the researchers engaged in discussions using dialogic reliability checks, (Akerlind 2005) to reach consensus on a small number (less than ten percent) of disagreements about coding. This is an appropriate way to ensure credibility of data analysis in interview studies. The remaining transcripts were then analysed using the template. The team continued to engage in dialogic reliability checks as the analysis proceeded. This process involved another researcher assuming the role of arbitrator. This arbitrator was involved in the broader study, with expertise in children's moral development, but was not directly involved in the day to day coding work. Lack of consensus occurred in less than ten percent of coding queries.

Ambiguous responses were noted as not codable.

Results

Results with respect to the ethnic background scenario are presented first followed by the results for the aggressive behaviour scenario.

Ethnic Background Scenario

With respect to the ethnic background scenario, most children (91%, 159 children) indicated that they would include the child of a different ethnic background in their play. Most of the justifications for including Zui fell within the moral domain (96%). Of these, 69% of responses were prosocial/empathy and 27% referred to fairness/inclusion. A very small number of responses ($n = 3$, 2%) referred to personal choice. Examples of reasoning behind a decision to include Zui included:

Child: Because he might not have any friends (prosocial).

Child: Because they might have fun (prosocial).

Child: Because it doesn't matter what type of language they speak because you can still just be their friend (fairness/inclusion).

For the small number of children who would exclude Zui ($n = 14$, 8%), most of the justifications (92%) referred to ethnic stereotypes or personal characteristics, including the language barrier, with only one child referring to personal choice. Examples of reasoning behind decisions to exclude Zui included:

Child: Because maybe Zui won't want to play with the white boy.

Interviewer: Why do you think he might not want to

Child: Because he's white.

Child: Because he comes from another country

Interviewer: Why should he not play with him because of that?

Child: Because he won't understand.

Fifteen children (10%) indicated that they would change their mind and not play with the child of different ethnic background if their friends told them not to. For example:

Interviewer: What if James' friends say don't play with Zui because he speaks a different language and comes from a different country, do you think he should still play with Zui then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because they in a different country and they are not really the same and they can't become friends.

However, most children ($n = 142$, 90%) indicated they would still play with Zui even if their friends told them not to with moral justifications evident. For example:

Interviewer: What if James' friends say don't play with Zui because he speaks a different language and comes from a different country, do you think he should still play with Zui then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because if you don't play with him you will just be being mean.

In contrast, most of the children who had originally excluded Zui ($n = 9$, 64%) changed their minds to include Zui if their friends told them to. For example:

Interviewer: What if James' friends say play with Zui even though he is from a different country and speaks a different language, do you think he should play with Zui then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because everybody's friends.

Only five children maintained their response to exclude Zui even when their friends told them to play with him for example citing the language barrier:

Interviewer: What if James' friends say play with Zui even though he is from a different country and speaks a different language, do you think he should play with Zui then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because he still speaks a different language but, if he learns some English, he should play with him.

Most children ($n = 108$, 70%) maintained their belief that Zui should be included even when the teacher suggested otherwise:

Interviewer: What if James' teacher says don't play with Zui because he speaks a different language and comes from a different country, do you think he should still play with Zui then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because it's not being nice when you don't play with people.

Forty-four children (29%) changed their minds to exclude Zui if the teacher said that they should, indicating teacher authority:

Interviewer: What if James' teacher says don't play with Zui because he speaks a different language and comes from a different country, do you think he should still play with Zui then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because he has to listen to his teacher and do what the teacher says to him.

Of the children who originally excluded Zui, two children (14%) changed their minds to include Zui if the teacher said that they should, again indicating teacher authority:

Interviewer: What if James' teacher says play with Zui even though he is from a different country and speaks a different language, do you think he should play with Zui then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because the teacher said be friends.

Twelve children (86%) maintained their response to exclude Zui even when the teacher said they should include him:

Interviewer: What if James' teacher says play with Zui even though he is from a different country and speaks a different language, do you think he should play with Zui then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because he still speaks a different language.

Children's responses to the ethnic background scenario indicated that most children (91%, 159 children) would include a child of a different ethnic background in their

play. Justifications for including Zui were primarily within the moral domain (96%). Most children indicated that they would still play with Zui even if their friends or their teacher said that it would be okay to exclude him. In the following section children's responses to the aggression scenario are presented.

Aggression Scenario

For the aggressive scenario a different picture emerged. Only 34% ($n = 59$) of the children said that they would include a child who was aggressive in their play with most children ($n = 112$, 65%) not willing to play with a child who bullied. Justifications for excluding Jack included reference to personal characteristics (31%), personal choice (18%), prosocial reasons (5%) and reference to group functioning (3%). Examples of reasoning behind decisions to exclude Jack including personal characteristics and prosocial justifications due to the consequences of aggressive actions:

Interviewer: Why do you think he shouldn't play with him?

Child: Because he – you can turn into a bully (personal characteristics)

Child: Because if they are pushing each other around it won't be very nice and somebody could get hurt (prosocial)

When including Jack, 27% of responses were moral justifications referring to either prosocial reasons (21%) or fairness/inclusion (6%). The remainder of justifications referred to group functioning (3%), personal choice (3%) or were conditional (3%). Examples of reasoning behind including Jack:

Interviewer: Why do you think he should play with him?

Child: Because it's not very nice to leave other people alone (prosocial)

Child: Because he's a new person and he doesn't have any friends to play with (prosocial)

Twenty-eight children (26%) indicated that they would change their mind and play with an aggressive child if their friends told them to play, highlighting the influence of friendships, for example:

Interviewer: What if Michael's friends say play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should play with Jack then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because sometimes I listen to my friends

Nearly three quarters ($n = 81$, 74%) of those children who originally said that Michael should not play with Jack maintained their response to exclude Jack even though their friends held beliefs to the contrary:

Interviewer: What if Michael's friends say play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should play with Jack then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because they push, because he will push them.

Only a small number of children ($n = 9$, 15%) changed their minds to exclude Jack if their friends said that they should:

Interviewer: What if Michael's friends say don't play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should still play with Jack then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because he's bossy and if he was nice he could play with friends, but if he's bossy, friends wouldn't like to play with him.

Nearly half of the children ($n = 53$, 49%) of those who originally said that Michael should not play with Jack changed their minds if their teacher told them to play indicating teacher authority to be a strong influence:

Interviewer: What if Michael's teacher says play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should play with Jack then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because the teacher says.

However, over half ($n = 56$, 51%) of those children who originally said that Michael should not play with Jack maintained their response to exclude Jack even though their teacher told them to play with him:

Interviewer: What if Michael's teacher says play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should play with Jack then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not, even if his teacher says?

Child: Because then he might get hurt.

Twenty-one children (36%) changed their minds to exclude Jack if their teacher said that they should:

Interviewer: What if Michael's teacher says don't play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should still play with Jack then?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because the teacher said not to play with him because he'll just hurt you too.

In contrast, 38 children (64%) said they would still play with Jack even when the teacher said that they shouldn't:

Interviewer: What if Michael's teacher says don't play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes, do you think he should still play with Jack then?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because people can feel lonely if they don't play with anybody.

Children's responses to the aggression scenario indicated that most children would not include Jack, described as aggressive, in their play ($n = 112$, 65%). Justifications for excluding Jack included reference to personal characteristics (31%), personal choice (18%), moral/prosocial reasons (5%) and reference to group functioning (3%). A smaller number of children 34% ($n = 59$) indicated they would include Jack in their play. Most children maintained their decision to exclude Jack in response to peers saying that it was okay to include him however, nearly half changed their mind to include Jack if their teacher said it was okay to do so. In the following section we discuss findings for both the ethnic background and aggressive scenarios and how children's judgements about these types of issues provide insight into how children engage in complex decision making.

Discussion

In summary, most children were open to including children of a different ethnic background and who spoke another language in their play demonstrating a very strong acceptance of children from other ethnic backgrounds. This was not the case for the child who was perceived as aggressive and a bully and who was rejected as a play partner by the majority of children. Teacher opinions also appeared to have a larger influence on children's decision-making than the opinions of their peers indicating teacher authority. For the scenario on the inclusion of a peer from a different ethnic background, prosocial/empathy and fairness (moral) categories in the response coding were given as the primary reasons for this judgement. In contrast, for the scenario on inclusion of an aggressive peer in play the primary reason for exclusion was that aggression is a negative personal characteristic in play with others and that such behaviour can be hurtful and unfair.

Ethnic background

Resonating with the work of others and guided by a social-cognitive domain model, we found that children's evaluations depended on the target of exclusion (ethnic background or aggression) (Killen et al. 2002). In a similar manner to Killen et al., (2002) in their study with Grade 4 students, we also found that exclusion based on ethnic background was viewed as wrong by the majority of our Grade 1 participants. Furthermore, excluding based on ethnic background was deemed wrong even if the teacher mandated it (authority influence). When including a child from another ethnic background Killen et al., (2002) found fairness took priority over other group functioning and personal choice, however in our study the majority of children referred to moral justifications which we have extended to refer to as prosocial/empathy (69%) that included helping others, caring for others by including them, or referring to the feelings of the individual excluded.

Our findings also indicated that for the small number of children who would exclude Zui ($n = 14$, 8%), the majority of justifications (92%) made reference to ethnic stereotypes or personal characteristics and the language barrier (because he comes from another country) with only one child referring to personal choice. In contrast Killen et al., (2002) found participants justified not being friends with someone of a different race by stating that it was "up to the child to decide" (individual prerogative/ personal choice) and that they "probably didn't have the same interests" (individual preferences/ personal choice).

Children's social experiences play an important role in how children make judgments about exclusion and social consensus (peers) could be expected to have an influence on the decisions that children make around whether to include or exclude others in their play. According to Killen et al. (2002), taking a social-cognitive domain perspective would suggest that social consensus may be relevant for transgressions perceived as social-conventional but not those transgressions perceived as moral. Thus, we were interested in whether children viewed inclusion or exclusion on the basis of ethnic background as a social-conventional decision, and therefore subject to social consensus, or as a moral decision. In the ethnic background scenario, we found that the majority of children did not change their mind to exclude Zui even when their peers suggested that it was okay to exclude indicating that social consensus did not appear to be relevant in this situation. If, indeed, social consensus only becomes important for social-conventional decisions, the children in the current study viewed exclusion on the basis of ethnic background as a moral issue.

As context plays an important role in the way children develop racial perspectives and intergroup contact alone is not enough to facilitate positive intergroup attitudes, the school setting is important. This includes the messages from authority figures, the nature of intergroup interactions and the presence of common goals (whole school identity). In keeping with findings around social consensus, previous research (see e.g., Smetana 1995) indicates

that the influence of authority is not pertinent in children's moral evaluations. In other words, moral transgressions (but not social-conventional transgressions) are viewed as morally wrong regardless of the views of authority figures such as teachers. In the current study, even though authority appeared to have more sway over children's decision making around inclusion or exclusion than social consensus, 70% of the children still indicated that they would include Zui even when the teacher (an authority figure) suggested that it would be okay to exclude Zui based on ethnic background. This again suggests that children viewed inclusion or exclusion based on ethnic background as a moral issue and subject to higher moral principles than simply social conventions.

It is interesting to note that most children did not change their decisions to include a child in play from another ethnic background when directed by their teacher as schools, with social structures defined by protocols and procedures, providing a context of taken for granted modes of behaviour. These taken for granted modes of behaviour contribute to what is considered acceptable inclusive behaviour. As such, children come to know ways of socialisation and define themselves as students based on contextual experiences with teachers and schooling contexts (Thornberg 2008). Such school expectations can influence how a child reasons about interpersonal traits such as aggression as well as understandings about intergroup norms (e.g., expectations about appropriate friendships).

Aggression

The majority of children in our study indicated that they would not include a peer in play who was described as aggressive, as this trait was considered a negative personal characteristic with immoral consequences. This supports previous sociometric research which has demonstrated that the children who appear to be most at risk for rejection from the peer group appear to be those who exhibit persistent patterns of aggressive or disruptive behaviour (Parke et al., 1997). However, there is some

evidence to suggest that aggressive behaviour may not be as salient a reason for rejection in the early childhood years as it is in later years (Author, 2004; Dunn and McGuire, 1992). Similarly, not all aggressive children are rejected and not all rejected children are aggressive (Coie, Dodge, Terry and Wright, 1991; French, 1988).

Previous research has revealed that classroom norms influence children's aggressive attitudes and behaviour, with aggression being viewed more positively by other group members when aggression is normative vs. non-normative (Boiven, Dodge, and Coie 1995; Nipedal, Nesdale, and Killen 2010). School norms can then moderate, if not extinguish, contrary social group norms, at least in younger children. In adolescence, friends' moral reasoning is more consistently related to children's aggressive behaviour than individual moral reasoning (Gasser and Malti 2012). While our study included younger children, our findings would suggest that, for most participants, aggression was not a sanctioned peer group trait with the majority of children ($n = 112$, 65%) not willing to play with a child who was bossy and pushed others around.

With respect to social consensus, in a similar finding to the ethnic background scenario, children appeared unlikely to change their mind about whether to include or exclude Jack if their peers said that they should. Most children continued to exclude Jack despite their peers indicating it was okay to include an aggressive child in play. Children were however, more likely to respond to the influence of authority in the aggression scenario than the ethnic background scenario with nearly half of the children ($n = 53$, 49%) who had originally excluded Jack changing their minds to include Jack if the teacher said that they should. This deference to an authority figure may reflect the educational context and social structures that emphasise rules around behaviours. However, of the small number of children who originally indicated that they would include Jack, the majority said they would still include Jack despite

authority influence indicating that these children viewed exclusion in this domain as a moral issue.

Conclusions

Our study contributes to further understanding about how school contexts are connected to children's reasoning for moral inclusion. These current findings support our previous work (Authors, 2017a) suggesting school context can play an influential role in children's reasoning for moral inclusion and their ability to weigh up multiple perspectives. School contexts that enhance solidarity may promote shared values to overcome prejudice related to cultural stereotypes. Blum (2012) discusses the concept of "trans-group solidarity" referring to solidarity across in-groups and out-groups. Whilst Blum puts forward the idea of trans-group solidarity in the context of a multi-ethnic nation, the concept can also be used to consider in-groups and out-groups in school contexts in a similar fashion to a shared school identity as proposed by Cameron and Rutland (2008). Developmental research then suggests that, in order to reduce prejudice in school contexts, we need to be working towards promoting this trans-group solidarity in the form of a superordinate shared school identity which values positive diversity and promotes equality (Blum 2012; Cameron and Rutland 2008). As most children in our study demonstrated a very strong acceptance of children from other ethnicities, further research exploring the nature of classroom interactions and the schools' approach to ethnic diversity would add a further dimension to the findings reported in this paper.

When children view a transgression as conventional, rather than moral, they are less likely to apply principles of fairness or equality (Rutland and Killen 2015). In this way children treat rules about harm to others as independent of authority jurisdiction,

and the breach as wrong even if authority figures, such as teachers, sanction the act. In our study nearly half the children changed their minds to include Jack who was described as aggressive if the teacher said that they should. This finding would again point to the need for further exploration of the classroom context, the power relations between the children and their teachers, and the potency of authority. It is important for children and educators to reflect on questions of inclusion and exclusion, and the conditions and justifications connected. It seems also important to support children to have the courage to stand with their ideas regardless of authority, but also to be open to perspectives other than their own. Are inclusion and exclusion binary dimensions or can they exist side by side? What kind of processes do school contexts, teaching traditions and as well as ritual norms, and intersubjective processes between teacher and children contribute to, when it comes to inclusion/exclusion.

Our findings indicate that, even in the early years of school, children use multiple forms of reasoning when making decisions about inclusion and exclusion. For some children, exclusion was considered wrong because it was unfair and unkind to individuals, for other children, exclusion was legitimate as it is a matter of personal choice. Understanding how young children make judgements about these types of issues provides insight into how children engage in complex decision making, decisions that involve weighing up multiple perspectives including personal choice and issues of justice and fairness. Given that children in the early years of school are clearly making decisions about inclusion and exclusion and are able to provide justifications for these decisions, it would seem important to include some clear statements around values and values education in the early years curriculum. In particular, a focus on tolerance and inclusion and active citizenship in the early years of school would be of benefit in highlighting these aspects to early years educators.

Study limitations and future directions

Both scenarios presented to the children in this study consisted of one gender (i.e. Jack, a boy, who is bossy and pushes other kids around, and Zui, a boy from another country, who speaks a different language). While our previous research has signalled that using one gender may not be problematic for children regarding inclusion and exclusion (Authors, 2017a), it may be considered a limitation. Therefore, we suggest that future research include scenarios which involve girls and boys.

The second scenario presented to the children aimed to find out about children's decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion based on a child who came from a different country.

Within this scenario, we also introduced a language barrier which may impact on our understandings of children's perspectives on inclusion or exclusion due to ethnic background.

It is recommended that future research separates ethnic background and language barriers. In addition, as we did not have information about the ethnicity of our study participants, we were unable to address possible confounds between the ethnicity of our participants and the likelihood of them including a child from a different ethnic background than the dominant Australian ethnic background. We acknowledge that this is a potential limitation of our findings.

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by [Removed for peer review].

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Table 1 *Moral reasoning justification categories*

Response Category	Definition
<i>Moral justifications</i>	
Prosocial / Empathy	Refers to helping others or caring for others by including them; or refers to feelings of the individual excluded; or to mutual benefit.
Inclusion/Fairness	Refers to fairness in treatment of others; individuals have equal rights; or wrongfulness of discrimination based on a person's characteristics (e.g., language or cultural background); or the consequences of discrimination.
<i>Social-conventional justifications</i>	
Group functioning stereotypes	Refers to social expectations and traditions; and the need to make own group function well; including that there are understandings of how you behave with others in a peer group. [This is not teacher / school as an authority telling you what you should do.]
Cultural stereotypes / Personal characteristics	Refers to individual by their group membership (e.g., cultural background) and its effects; might learn wrong things; difference is a barrier. Refers to personal characteristics such as aggressive behaviour.
External influences (peers, teachers, parents)	Refers to peers' opinions on whether or not to reject; or to authority figures' (teachers, parents) opinions; or to the authority of the school rules or the teacher as an arbiter for what you should do; appeal to an authority to solve the problem ("Tell the teacher.").

Psychological justifications

Personal choice Refers to personal benefit or personal autonomy (“because I want to”)

Play is conditional Refers to conditions that must be met before including the other (e.g., I
would only play / be friends if)
