

# Q&A: Research shows children and adolescents may be motivated to rectify gender and ethnicity biases in the classroom

June 26 2024

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A new *Child Development* study by researchers at the University of Maryland, Furman University, Education Northwest and University of Hawai'i at Manoa in the United States has examined whether children

think it's unfair for a teacher to select students from only one gender or ethnic group for leadership duties.

Researchers learned that children and adolescents are not only aware of these situations, but they are also motivated to rectify these types of inequalities in the classroom. Understanding how children and adolescents interpret and evaluate complex interactions in the classroom provides the basis for creating strategies to promote just and fair classroom environments, which enable all students to learn and thrive.

The Society for Research in Child Development had the opportunity to discuss these findings with Dr. Melanie Killen from the Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology at the University of Maryland in the United States.

## **What led you to study gender and ethnicity biases in the classroom?**

For more than two decades, we have investigated whether children display gender and ethnicity biases. Only recently have [child development](#) experts examined whether and when children recognize group-based biases in their everyday lives. We know that teachers often display implicit and explicit biases in school contexts. These biases can create [social inequalities](#) when some children are provided more opportunities than are other children based on their [group identity](#). In this study, we chose to focus on white and Latine students, as these two groups represented the largest majority (white) and ethnic-racial minority (Latine) in the region where the data were collected.

We wanted to know whether children and adolescents recognize when biases occur in the classroom and how they evaluate it. One context where this happens is when teachers assign students to take on highly

valued leadership duties (e.g., assigning only boys to become crossing guards). We decided to fill this gap in the literature by closely examining whether children from 8–14 years of age noticed teacher-generated biases about who gets to have a leadership role and whether they would desire to rectify this inequality by picking someone else if they had a chance to do so.

## **Can you please provide a brief overview of the study?**

In our study, we surveyed children and adolescents 8–14 years of age about whether they thought it was all right for teachers to pick specific groups of kids to do leadership duties. We did this by showing participants in the study pictures of a teacher selecting only girls, only boys, only [white students](#), or only Latine students to do different leadership duties, such as being the crossing guard, passing out papers, picking up messages from the office or helping to take attendance. We also showed them pictures of a teacher picking equal numbers of girls and boys or white and Latine students as a comparison.

Would children evaluate unequal and equal allocations of leadership duties the same? We found that adolescents, more than children, viewed unequal teacher allocations of leadership duties as less okay than equal allocations due to group-based inequalities. Specifically, they viewed unequal allocations favoring white students as more wrong than unequal allocations favoring Latine students. Interestingly, they viewed unequal allocations favoring boys the same as unequal allocations favoring girls.

The participants also expected peers who shared the identity of a group disadvantaged by the teacher's allocation to view it more negatively than others. When given an opportunity to select a new student for the leadership duty, both children and adolescents chose a student who has been disadvantaged before, which we term a strategy to rectify inequalities.

In summary, adolescents were more likely to view unequal allocations as more wrong than did children, but both age groups expected someone who shared the membership (by gender or ethnicity) to feel bad if someone from their group did not get a chance to be a leader. The majority of children desired to rectify the inequality. Thus, children as young as 8 years of age become aware of situations in which not everyone gets a chance to have a special role in the classroom.

## **How can these findings be used to inform professional development for teachers?**

These findings are important for alerting educators to the fact that children as young as 8 years old in third grade are noticing inequalities in the classroom. We know that children who experience exclusion and [unfair treatment](#) are at risk for low motivation, anxiety, and social withdrawal. While this is particularly true for girls and marginalized students, all children are vulnerable in classrooms where inequalities occur and interactions are not equitable, fair or just.

Inequalities create anxiety and insecurity which hinder the opportunity for classrooms to be a safe space where children can grow and develop. In our study, children wanted to rectify the inequality and expected their peer who was a member of a group not selected to be a leader to feel bad. Understanding perceptions of teacher-based bias provides an opportunity for interventions designed to create fair and just classrooms that motivate all students to achieve.

## **Was there anything that surprised you?**

We were surprised that the 8–10-year-old group desired to rectify the inequalities by choosing a student to be a leader when the student was a member of a disadvantaged group. Generally, children at this age are less

critical of authority, including parents and teachers, than are adolescents. While it is important to recognize an authority member's experience and knowledge to make good decisions, it is also important to know when someone is doing something unfair to others, which might be an action that they are unaware that they are doing. Thus, an important part of social and cognitive development is to know when someone is unfair to another person and to try and help rectify the inequity.

## **What's next in this field of research?**

We have several new lines of research in the works. One line of research is examining how children's and adolescents' theories of prejudice bear on their recognition of when it is necessary to challenge unfair treatment displayed by others. One view is that prejudice is fixed and cannot be changed. Another view is that prejudice is malleable and can be changed. Very little research has examined how this bears on children's and adolescents' willingness to accept the status quo or challenge inequalities.

Another line of research is studying what we refer to as "children as agents of change." This includes the conditions that enable children to detect other forms of bias in the [classroom](#), such as those from peers as well as how to confront microaggressions and unfair treatment of others.

A third line of research we are pursuing is determining how to change attitudes in childhood based on our research findings about how children and adolescents make decisions. Our school-based program is called Developing Inclusive Youth, and provides students the opportunity to respond to an interactive online peer exclusion scenario each week followed by a teacher-led group discussion to discuss actual incidents of social exclusion that students experience. The goal is to enable children to change group norms and reject unfair treatment based on group identity. The program's aim is to help create inclusive classrooms for all

children to succeed.

**More information:** Children and adolescents rectify unequal allocations of leadership duties in the classroom, *Child Development* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.14123](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.14123)

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

Citation: Q&A: Research shows children and adolescents may be motivated to rectify gender and ethnicity biases in the classroom (2024, June 26) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-qa-children-adolescents-rectify-gender.html>

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