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Social Dynamics Management: What Is It and Why Is It Important for Intervention?

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This special issue focuses on school social dynamics and their implications for supporting the academic, emotional, and behavioral adaptation of a broad range of youth who experience or are at risk for serious adjustment difficulties regardless of disability status or type. This topic has foundations in behavioral and social learning concepts, clinical and developmental psychology, and ecological and sociological theory. Recently, there has been a renewed effort to clarify how information about naturally occurring social structures and peer group processes can be incorporated in classroom management (Audley-Piotrowski, Singer, & Patterson, 2015; Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, & Rodkin, 2014). An aim of this work is to help teachers promote classroom ecologies that foster all students' adaptation while being attuned to ways to leverage social dynamics to support intervention intensification for youth with significant social and behavioral problems. The purpose of this special issue is to review theoretical foundations of social dynamic processes and management, highlight work in this area, and consider next steps.

Meaning of Social Dynamics

The term *social dynamics* refers to the interactions, relationships, peer networks/structures, interpersonal roles, culture, and norms youth co-construct to organize ecological settings (e.g., classroom, school, after-school programs: Farmer et al., 2017). Social dynamics are relational, negotiated, and often fluid (Adler & Adler, 1998; Cairns & Cairns, 1994). They also depend on the characteristics of the individuals who make up the social system as well as proximal and broader societal rules and expectations that govern their social opportunities (Farmer, Reinke, & Brooks, 2014; Müller & Zurbriggen, 2016).

Foundations of a Social Dynamics Perspective of Problem Behavior

Educational researchers who study social development are tasked with clarifying the interplay between two dynamic entities: the status of the student within the group and the structure of the group itself (Bronfenbrenner, 1943). This dynamic focus is central to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and he suggested that intervention research should include a focus on determining how to leverage peer group processes to promote positive behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011). Reflecting Bronfenbrenner's person-in-context perspective and building on his doctoral training in social learning theory with Albert Bandura, Cairns (1979) observed that students who frequently interact together tend to synchronize their behavior in ways that support both the behavior and the relationship. Cairns identified three forms of social synchrony: *imitation*, which involves a student using the behavior of another as a model for her or his own behavior; *reciprocity*, which involves two students responding to each other in similar ways that elicit and reinforce common behaviors; and *complementarity*, which occurs when two students have different status and behaviors, but the behavior of each depends on that of the other (e.g., leader–follower). Cairns found that as students are aggregated in classrooms, they synchronize their behavior to form distinct social networks and structures (Cairns, Leung, Buchanan, & Cairns, 1995). In turn, longitudinal research has indicated that school social networks contribute to the establishment, maintenance, and adaptation of students' behavior patterns over time (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

The importance of peer group and classroom social dynamics in students' social and behavioral development has also been highlighted in peer rejection research. Although students' own behavior tends to be an important

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contributor to rejected status (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990), students' reputations with peers help to define their role in the social system. When youth develop rejected status, they may find it difficult to shed these reputations even when their behavior improves (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990). In addition, students with chronic peer difficulties are likely to have social processing strategies and goals (e.g., dominance, retaliation, avoidance) that reflect and contribute to negative interactions with others (Erdley & Asher, 1999). In presenting a theory of peer rejection, Coie (1990) concluded that a student's own behavior may launch the peer rejection process, but how classmates respond to the student and the student's reaction in the context of classroom social norms may set the stage for an unfavorable peer reputation, adverse social goals and beliefs, undesirable social roles, and negative peer group affiliations that support problematic interactions. Such interaction patterns may involve coercion (e.g., escalating aversive behavior to get one's way) or deviancy training (i.e., reciprocal social acts that reinforce problem behavior) and may interfere with intervention (Dishion & Dodge, 2005; Dishion & Snyder, 2004). Furthermore, school- and classroom-level peer group processes may support students' problematic social roles and relationships and encourage antisocial and bullying behavior (Ahn & Rodkin, 2014; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka, & Trach, 2015; Light & Dishion, 2007).

A common feature across the work of Bronfenbrenner, Cairns, Coie, Dishion, Dodge, Hymel, Rodkin, and many others is that students' social interactions, their role or status in the peer system, their peer affiliations, and broader peer group processes all tend to operate in a collective fashion to contribute to patterns of social behavior. This does not mean they function as a single factor in a unidirectional, linear model with a specific path to a distinct outcome. Instead, it suggests that social development variables operate as a correlated, dynamic system within the classroom context where multiple factors bidirectionally influence each other. Collectively, they contribute to the student's social functioning in nuanced ways that are dependent on a fluid social ecology (Cairns, 1979; Dishion & Snyder, 2004; Farmer, Sutherland, et al., 2016). This correlated systems aspect of social development is at the core of the concept of classroom and school social dynamics.

Social Dynamics as Setting Events for Social Behavior and Adaptation

A dynamic, correlated systems view of the social development of students with chronic and significant behavior difficulties is highly consistent with social interactional perspectives in special education. In a review of classroom observation studies conducted by the Peabody Social Research Group, Shores and Wehby (1999) described the analysis of social interactions as streams of behavior that occur as reciprocal acts between youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and their teachers and peers. The importance of social interactional research is that it provides insights into the factors that function to maintain specific behaviors. For example, teachers may engage in escape, avoidance, and counter-control behaviors that reinforce or escalate disruptive and aggressive behaviors of students with EBD (Gunther et al., 1994).

Yet, the direct cause of a behavior is not always readily apparent. In an analysis of classroom social interaction patterns, the problem behavior of students with EBD was complex and appeared to be multidetermined by a wide breadth of potential stimuli (Wehby, Symons, & Shores, 1995). Although patterns of social behavior were identified, the authors concluded that the impact of discrete social stimuli appeared to be altered by setting events. Setting events include intrapersonal variables, environmental events, and social events that are temporally distant but influence stimulus–response relationships. Shores and Wehby (1999) concluded that there is a need to better understand the role of setting events on classroom social interactions. Furthermore, including setting events in the assessment and intervention process and looking beyond a single context (i.e., observing different classrooms across the day) may enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving students' social functioning (Wehby et al., 1995).

Social dynamics should be considered as potential setting events for chronic social behavior problems. Factors identified in the social development literature as contributing to students' social behavior and functioning are depicted in Figure 1. These include social synchrony, peer groups, peer acceptance, social roles and reputations, the school and/or classroom social hierarchy, social norms and goals, and relations with school adults. The bidirectional arrows indicate these factors may operate as a correlated system, with various factors influencing each other as they contribute to the student's behavior. Also, the arrows go across the classroom and school levels to indicate that these processes may operate differentially depending on the context. We expect that each of these factors may serve as a setting event to alter the motivating operations of specific antecedent–behavior–consequence contingencies. Because these factors may function as a system, changes in one factor may contribute to changes in other factors and influence the overall response and functioning of the student. This suggests that person-in-context intervention strategies are needed and should be responsive to the social ecology, the student's individual social experiences, and the interplay between the two (Farmer et al., 2017).

Managing Classroom and School Social Dynamics

Efforts to intervene with a student's social behavior tend to focus specifically on changing the behavior by altering

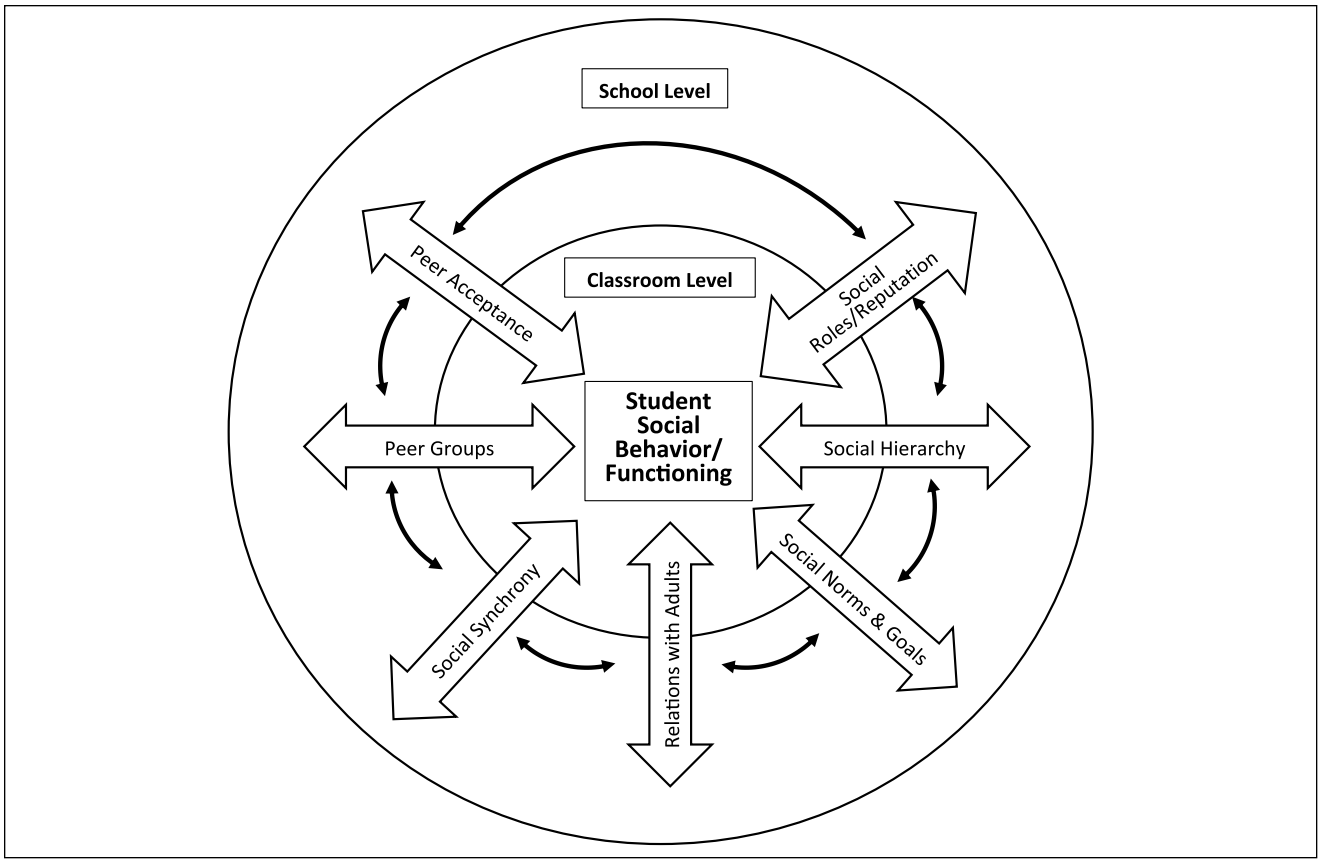

Figure 1. Social dynamics as setting events for social behavior.

antecedents and consequences. Although such an approach can be powerful in the short run because behavior tends to be responsive to its immediate context, such changes can be short lived because other equally powerful but less proximal factors are also in operation. The social development literature clearly shows that all of the factors listed in Figure 1 not only influence behavior but they also are associated with long-term patterns of social adjustment and outcomes (e.g., Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Coie et al., 1990; Farmer et al., 2017; Hymel et al., 2015).

Although these factors, or setting events, may not be the primary intervention focus, they may be critical to the success of the intervention. Consider a medical analogy: When a heart patient has surgery, it is likely the intervention will go beyond the surgery. The doctor may monitor and make recommendations related to other factors, such as the patient's lifestyle, other health concerns, medication use, and response to the surgery. The doctor is working from the perspective that the patient's health is a dynamic system, and the focus on postsurgery intervention will likely center on monitoring and intervening with specific factors that are most likely to contribute to the patient's health and functioning. Saying that correlated, contributing factors do not matter in relation to a student's social and behavioral functioning would be like a cardiologist ignoring a patient's diet, smoking, level of exercise, blood pressure, and medication. Without postsurgery changes in correlated factors, the conditions leading to the original problem are far more likely to recur. Clearly, this is not ideal; therefore, medical personnel build their practice around dynamic systems models that include contributing factors.

Social dynamics management operates in much the same way. Although the management of classroom and school dynamics is not likely to be the primary social intervention, the focus is on managing the social experience of the individual student, the classroom social system, the school social system, and the interplay between the three. It also involves doing this in a way that is coordinated with primary intervention efforts and includes feedback loops to monitor responses and adaptions in naturally occurring social processes (e.g., peer acceptance, social synchrony, social norms and goals, relations with adults) and structures (e.g., roles/reputation, social hierarchy, peer groups).

What does social dynamics management look like? The overarching purpose of social dynamics management is to bring the general social structure and processes of the classroom into alignment with the social support and intervention needs of students with chronic problem behavior.

This involves managing the general social context, including the physical space, students' social opportunities and experiences, and the overall social climate and peer culture; awareness of how moment-to-moment activities and events may contribute to a focal student's social behavior, roles, and relationships; and unobtrusively intervening in daily activities and events to complement other social interventions (e.g., social skills training, peer network interventions, peer support strategies). These efforts may be incorporated into Multitiered System of Supports (see Farmer et al., 2017).

To do this, teachers are likely to need support and guidance in a variety of ways. First, teachers may need training to incorporate social dynamics management into their daily instructional and classroom management approaches (Motoca et al., 2014). Next, teachers may need information and data about the general social functioning of both the classroom and the focal student (see Farmer, Lane, Lee, Hamm, & Lambert, 2012). Finally, teachers may need direct problem assessment support to identify intervention leverage points, including setting events and the antecedents and consequences of the problem behavior (see Farmer, Chen, et al., 2016; Kern & Wehby, 2014). Special educators can serve as intervention specialists to provide support to teachers in these activities (Farmer, Sutherland, et al., 2016; Maggin, Wehby, Farmer, & Brooks, 2016; Motoca et al., 2014).

Empirical Support for Social Dynamics Management

Although research on social dynamics management is just emerging, the extant research suggests that it holds promise in helping to improve students' social experiences. When teachers actively manage social dynamics, students have better peer experiences in the social ecology, including reduction in aggression and a greater sense of school bonding and positive perceptions of the school environment in elementary classrooms (Gest et al., 2014); greater peer acceptance and reduction in level of dislike, withdrawal, and victimization (van den Berg, Segers, & Cillessen, 2012); more positive peer group associations for aggressive middle school students (Farmer et al., 2010); greater perceptions of peer protection from peer victimization for students with disabilities (Chen, Hamm, Farmer, Lambert, & Mehtaji, 2015) and general education students (Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2011); stronger sense of social belonging in adolescence (Hamm et al., 2011; Norwalk, Hamm, Farmer, & Barnes, 2016); greater social integration and popularity in elementary classrooms (Hoffman, Hamm, & Farmer, 2015); and perceptions of positive and supportive peer cultures for academic effort and achievement in early adolescence (Hamm, Farmer, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2014). Furthermore, teachers can be trained to manage classroom social dynamics (Motoca et al., 2014). Such training can enhance their attunement (Hamm et al., 2011), and teachers' attunement to and management of classroom social dynamics is associated with higher classroom quality and teachers' efficacy to support socially struggling students (Farmer et al., 2010; Ryan, Kuusinen, & Bedoya-Skoog, 2015).

Research Considerations

The Current Articles

The articles in this special series reflect a range of social processes and contexts that are central to the peer experiences of youth with chronic social difficulties. The goal of bringing together this eclectic group of articles is to highlight ways the peer ecology may contribute to the behavior and relationships of youth and to focus on approaches to manage social contexts to promote the positive peer experiences of diverse students.

In the first article, Trach, Lee, and Hymel (2018) provided a conceptual review to consider how natural group dynamics can be incorporated into social-emotional learning (SEL) programs. Building from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Harris's (1995) group socialization theory, these authors highlight ways that emotional and behavioral problems may be attenuated by addressing group-level processes through SEL intervention. They also discuss the need to support teachers' use of SEL strategies that focus on peer group dynamics. This article provides a clear articulation of factors to consider in the development of schoolwide programs to address the interplay between individual and context-oriented strategies to support youth with chronic social problems.

The second article brings to the forefront potential contributions of social dynamics in the development of problem behavior. Kornienko, Dishion, and Ha (2018) examined the role of peer selection and peer socialization in early adolescent antisocial (e.g., lying, stealing) and violent (e.g., physical attacks, carrying weapons) behavior. Using advanced statistical techniques (i.e., stochastic actor-based modeling), the authors found evidence for the confluence hypothesis, which posits that youth tend to select friends with similar levels of behavior (i.e., peer selection effects) and then, over time, youth increasingly adopt their friends' behavior (i.e., peer socialization). Following a sample of youth as they progressed from Grades 6 to 8, the authors found that students who had similar levels of antisocial behavior were more likely to select each other as peer affiliates as they transitioned from the Grade 6 to Grade 7. They also found peer socialization effects for violent behavior: Youths' violent behavior became more similar to their peers' total levels of violent behavior between Grades 7 and 8. These results highlight potential iatrogenic effects of peer

dynamics in school and underscore the need for teachers and other school professionals to monitor and manage these dynamics to prevent antisocial patterns and promote prosocial relationships for high-risk youth.

In the third article, van den Berg and Stoltz (2018) tested the effectiveness of an intervention designed to create opportunities for social interaction between youth with high levels of aggression and their prosocial peers by seating them next to each other in class. They compared the intentional seating of aggressive youth next to prosocial peers with the random seating of aggressive youth next to random peers over the course of a 10-week period in a randomized controlled trial. In all, 221 students in Grades 4 to 6 were randomly assigned to intervention (prosocial peer) or control (random peer) conditions. Over time, aggressive youth were better liked by prosocial seatmates and demonstrated fewer externalizing behavior problems according to teacher ratings, compared with aggressive youth seated next to random peers. The effect of a prosocial peer was particularly beneficial to aggressive youth who were disliked by peers. Youth who sat next to an aggressive peer did not become more aggressive or less prosocial over time, even as the social status of prosocial peers declined as a result of the seating arrangement. As these authors suggest, increasing teacher skills to manage classroom social dynamics through seating arrangements can create positive changes for aggressive youth. Yet there is a need for more work to clarify the social relational impact of such intervention on focal prosocial peers as well as on the broader classroom social dynamics.

The fourth article focused on an urban after-school program in a low-resource community. Cappella, Hwang, Kieffer, and Yates (2018) examined how features of the ecology at Time 1 (e.g., supportive relationships with adults and peers, staff over control) relate to students' Time 2 academic skills (i.e., oral reading fluency), academic self-concept, and academic engagement. A longitudinal design with multireporter methods (i.e., instructor report, self-report, observations) was used to follow a sample of low-income elementary and middle school students. Multilevel analyses revealed a positive association between Time 1 after-school classroom ecology and Time 2 academic skills and academic self-concept, meaning that more positive classroom features were associated with greater academic skills and higher academic self-concept over time. Furthermore, the authors examined whether these associations differed based on youths' self-reported social-behavioral risk (e.g., social competence, misconduct) and found significant interactions between classroom ecology and social-behavioral risk on academic skills, academic engagement, and academic self-concept. Youth with high social-behavioral risk had lower academic skills compared with their lower risk peers in less positive classroom ecologies and showed greater gains in academic engagement in more positive classroom ecologies compared with low-risk peers. The link between students' social experiences in after-school settings and their academic performance suggests that efforts to bolster academic success should consider how students' peer experiences and relationships with teachers can be leveraged in interventions designed to increase student performance.

The final article focuses on peer-based interventions to enhance the social opportunities and relationships of students with severe disabilities. Carter (2018) argued that although a number of peer interventions are advocated, they are rarely implemented. In turn, the peer interactions and relationships critical to school success and well-being can be elusive for many students with intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. Carter's article highlights promising approaches for enhancing the social lives of secondary students with severe disabilities, related to five areas of intervention for secondary schools: student-related factors, peer-related factors, support-related factors, opportunity-related factors, and context-related factors. He posits that with increased reliance on direct adult support for students with severe disabilities, the "invisible hand" of adults (Farmer et al., 2011) is not so invisible for students with severe disabilities. The prominent presence of adults in these students' school lives influences peer relationships, as adults can become interfering "mediators" within interactions and an added source of stigmatization, and may detract peers from socializing naturally or at all if they perceive they are being "monitored" (Carter, 2018). His primary focus then turns to how various peer-mediated approaches—peer support arrangements, peer network interventions, and peer partner programs—can be drawn upon to address one or more of these important factors. He presents research to support the use of each of these approaches to increase social interactions, social contacts, and relationships for students with severe disabilities.

Intervention Implications and Future Research Needs

The commentary at the end of the special series provides a strong discussion of the implications of these articles, and social dynamics management more generally, for social intervention supports for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Lee (2018) discussed linkages between functional behavioral analysis and management of the peer ecology. As he points out, a social dynamics perspective can bring the "why" of specific problem behaviors into better focus. Lee suggests that when teachers are attuned to the peer social system, they may be better positioned to clarify the function of behavior and to better match intervention strategies to peer process factors that support specific patterns of behavior.

The points of Lee's commentary fit well with a social interactional perspective and the seminal work of Richard

Shores (e.g., Shores & Wehby, 1999) to underscore the importance of peers in students' behavior patterns. As suggested earlier, behavior is often multidetermined, and viewing social dynamics as setting events may help clarify factors that elicit and maintain general patterns of problematic behavior. By bringing together functional assessments and social dynamic constructs (e.g., Farmer et al., 2012), it may be possible to develop context-based interventions that use the power of the peer group to complement and reinforce the effectiveness of more individually focused strategies. There is a need for a renewed focus on observational studies that examine students' interaction patterns in relation to social dynamic factors. Such research may help yield innovative contextual assessment and intervention approaches to support the intensification of interventions for students whose behavioral difficulties reflect the confluence of multiple factors.

The articles in this issue provide an important foundation for considering the breadth and potential of social dynamics management as a component of the intervention process for students who have chronic social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. As work in this area moves forward, it is important to remember that social dynamics are relationally bound and often involve such concepts as an imbalance of power, status and hierarchy, and in-group and out-group processes (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015; Trach et al., 2018). These concepts are central to the study of bullying, victimization, sexual harassment, and other maladaptive relationship processes (Rinehart & Espelage, 2016; Rodkin, 2011; Ybarra, Espelage, Rohling-Langhinrichsen, Korchmaros, & Boyd, 2016). It is equally important to recognize that not only patterns of behavior but also patterns of relationships may contribute to the adjustment difficulties of youth across childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Coie, 1990; Dishion & Snyder, 2004). Furthermore, we must extend our focus beyond youth who have clear social deficits and include an emphasis on students who are coercive leaders who may not only be at risk themselves but also set the stage for social and behavioral difficulties of classmates. From this lens, the study of social dynamics should be a central component of research on the development, prevention, and treatment of emotional and behavioral difficulties for a broad range of children and youth.

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