

“The ‘Unpopular’ Children Don’t Flow and Destroy the Atmosphere”: Social Flow in Latency Prevents Peer Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

Peer exclusion is an undesirable phenomenon with serious implications for the present and future of children experiencing it. Growing peer exclusion and bullying rates in elementary-school-age children, especially on social networks, have been examined from a mostly pathological perspective focused on the rejected child or rejecting group. This qualitative study sought developmental explanations for this phenomenon’s pervasiveness during latency. Twelve focus groups of 140 Israeli children in Grade 5 discussed peer exclusion and other social issues. The data were categorized according to the revised Van Kaam method improved by Moustakas. Three themes from aspects of group flow emerged: reduction in the egocentric position and rise in the group’s importance, flexibility with changing social norms, and ostracism when the children perceive a block in the “flow.” The findings confirmed that at latency age, the importance of social flow increases, and rejection and even bullying play a normative developmental role. This study adds an alternative to the literature explaining peer exclusion as the result of the rejected child’s personality or the group’s destructive dynamic. It suggests viewing peer exclusion as a normative development during latency, helping children develop a “social self” free from their egocentric positions to function with a group.

KEYWORDS: normative development, elementary school, latency period, flexibility, social norm.

Peer exclusion is common during latency (ages 9–11 years; Killen & Rutland, 2022) and has serious implications for primary-school-aged children (Reinhard et al., 2020) in educational (Tobia et al., 2017), behavioral (Brinker et al., 2022; Cheek et al., 2020), emotional (Fritz et al., 2020), mental, and health (Kiat et al., 2018) areas. The professional literature suggests two explanations for peer exclusion during latency. One approach believes that the rejected children’s personality traits cause their peer exclusion (Preti et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2006). The other approach considers the cause to be a destructive dynamic within the group of rejected children and the choice of a victim whom the group can target for harm (Demol et al., 2022).

A recent qualitative study (Fisher – Grafy, 2020; Fisher – Grafy & Halabi, 2023a) showed that, from the children’s point of view, peer exclusion is a natural phenomenon enabling them to protect the group from children who threaten its cohesion. This research suggested viewing peer exclusion as a phenomenon serving normative development during latency. It helps children develop a “social self”—a personality structure that allows individuals to free

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themselves from their egocentric positions to function within and for a group. Thus, in this study, we focus on the “social flow” phenomenon and investigate its connection to development during latency and the peer exclusion phenomenon common at this age.

Group flow is a relatively new and insufficiently defined concept (Engeser et al., 2021a). There are thirteen different terms used to label group flow: collective flow, combined flow, contagious flow, flow in teams, group flow, networked flow, shared flow, social flow, team flow, team-level flow, flow state in teams, flow in groups, team flow state. (Pels et al., 2018, p. 1–2)

The terms are based on Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) definitions, in which *social flow* is a state in which individuals merge with an activity, blurring the boundaries between the individuals and the activity. In this state, there is no awareness of the external world (e.g., ‘The world seems cut off from me’) and no self-awareness (e.g., loss of ego or self-forgetfulness). This state grants individuals’ power (e.g., ‘I feel immensely strong’). They join it naturally, without conflict, pressure, or force (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Engeser et al., 2021a; Pels et al., 2018).

In addition to the sense of power individuals experience, a state of flow positively impacts all areas: emotional, mental, physiological, and performance (Pels et al., 2018; Rau, 2017). Studies also identified competence-, (inter)action-, and relationship-related antecedents of group flow. *Competence-related* antecedents include a task-related collective warm-up; having task-relevant skills and knowing others’ skills; collective competence, efficacy, and collaboration; effective communication; decentralization within the group; effective teamwork; and receiving performance feedback. *Relationship-related* antecedents include trust within the group and social support between group members. Group flow enhances performance, empathy development between group members, group identification, and collective efficacy (Engeser et al., 2021a).

The definition of group flow can be decomposed into elements related to its individual or collective aspects. Individual aspects include how an individual experiences group flow, immerses into the activity, and enjoys and feels one with the group. Four categories of collective aspects relate to the features of a group as a whole being: a specific shared state, a specific group performance, a specific group interaction, and a specific group constellation (Pels et al., 2018)

Group flow has been researched and discussed mainly in the realms of work, music, and sport. However, a theoretical model built upon a consensus for an empirically proven, integrative definition of group flow has yet to be developed (Pels et al., 2018). Further, this term, group flow, has yet to be examined in the context of development during latency in general or of peer exclusion in this age group specifically.

Thus, this study appears to be the first to examine the social flow factors and their connection to peer exclusion during latency. Notably, although the study occurred in Israel, the Israeli education system is mostly similar in structure and system to elementary schools in Europe. Minor differences include that Israel has a higher average number of children in classrooms (26.3) than other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2022) countries (21.1) and more average hours of study (938 vs. 807) per year. In a survey on bullying conducted in Europe and Canada, 10% of the respondents reported having been bullied by peers several times in the last months (Inchley et al., 2020). A similar study in Israel reported an average of 12% (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2020).

Methods

We chose a phenomenological qualitative approach to provide insight into the role of peer exclusion in children’s development during latency. A phenomenological qualitative approach enables the researcher to understand the participants’ subjective experiences

regarding the studied phenomenon (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Moreover, it permits them to understand combinations of inter- and intrapsychic processes (Koller et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). One of the common phenomenological techniques is focus groups, where participants experience individual–group interplay and discuss the phenomenon that is the subject of the study. However, few studies have examined the individual–group interplay during latency (Levy & Killen, 2008). Using focus groups in this study allowed us to examine the individual–group interplay during latency. It enabled simultaneous personal expressions within the group setting to gain insight into the role of peer exclusion in children’s development during latency.

Ethics

Two ethics committees, one at Bar Ilan University and one at the Chief Scientist Department of the Israeli Ministry of Education, approved the study. Following the approvals, the parents of students at the five schools that agreed to participate were informed about the study via letters describing the purposes of the study. The parents were assured they could refuse their children’s participation or withdraw them from the study at any stage and guaranteed anonymity. The schools collected the parents’ consent letters and set the dates for the focus groups.

Participants

The participants were 140 Jewish Israeli fifth-grade children (boys and girls) aged 10 to 11 years from five elementary schools and average socioeconomic levels. All groups were gender heterogeneous but differed in their demographic characteristics. Three were from religious schools, and nine were from secular schools. They were recruited through a snowball method via psychological-educational services, educational counselors, and school principals. In total, 12 classes participated. Each class was considered a separate focus group with an average of 13 children per group. The focus groups were small relative to the class size because children who did not bring consent forms from their parents could not participate in the study.

Before each focus group started, the class’s homeroom teacher met the researcher and provided information about any rejected children and the social hierarchy to help analyze the class’s social dynamics. For example, the researcher asked how the teacher perceived the children’s friendships, who was/was not friends with whom, who were the most influential children, and how leaders led the other children to positive or negative behaviors. This information enabled the researcher to understand the contexts of the discourse in each class and manage the focus group so that no children would feel uncomfortable. According to the Ministry of Education’s requirements, the homeroom teachers accompanied the researcher and remained present throughout—but were not involved in—the discussion. The schools and participant names were omitted from the transcriptions, enabling the researchers to maintain neutrality while analyzing the data and concealing the participants’ identities before the study’s publication.

Data Collection Procedures

As a primary research method, focus groups allowed the researchers to observe the group dynamics in a natural setting in which peer exclusion occurs (Rodriguez et al., 2011) and document the group members’ subjective experiences, opinions, positions, and emotions regarding the discussed topic (Koller et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). The advantage of focus groups over personal interviews is that they allow both personal expressions of each individual and an examination of the interrelations between individuals within the group.

The focus groups were conducted during the school day, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The heart of each focus group was a discussion of the following story we composed especially for this study:

The fifth-graders in a New Zealand school decided for themselves in many matters. One day, they wanted to throw a birthday party for one of the boys in the class. They sent invitations to everyone except for two boys. The following day, the two boys who were not invited and their parents contacted the homeroom teacher and complained about not being invited. The teacher acknowledged the classmates and then phoned the parent committee, telling the parents and the pupils that the children must invite all classmates.

We chose New Zealand because a remote location allowed the participants to be open in their opinions and feelings regarding peer exclusion situations. They did not have to confront directly, from the beginning, situations they had experienced in their own classes. In addition, we learned from the children in the first focus group that they were afraid or embarrassed to talk about social issues when their teacher was present in the class. Thus, we refocused the questions mainly on the parents'—rather than the teachers'—reactions to the situation in the story.

After the story was read aloud, the participants responded to questions prepared especially for this study: What will the children in the story do after the teacher's and parents' intervention, and why? Why did the children in the New Zealand story not want to invite the two boys to the party? Which rules do children prefer to obey: the rules of parents (must invite the two boys to the class party) or rules the children determine (not to invite the two boys to the class party)? How would the classmates explain to the parents that they decided not to invite the two boys? Based on their answers, we asked more questions to clarify the circumstantial connection between the exception from the classmates' society and the social rejection of the two boys from the story.

The participants' words were audio recorded and transcribed from audio cassettes (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The transcripts contained 98 pages documenting 13 hours of recordings. Each researcher read the transcripts several times and separately analyzed the data in them.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Van Kaam method perfected by Moustakas (1994). The process involved seven stages. In the first stage, each researcher separately identified all statements mentioning reasons for peer exclusion; the second stage excluded all reasons unrelated to peer exclusion. Some children explained that not inviting the two children to the party was for external reasons unrelated to the class's social affairs. For example, some stated, "They had a social event," which was unrelated to peer exclusion; therefore, we removed it. In the third stage, the reasons for peer exclusion were classified into themes. In the fourth stage, each researcher separately described the themes from each focus group. Next, the themes were sorted into two categories: those related to the individual and those related to the group. In the sixth stage, both researchers formed a structural description of the themes separately. In the final stage, the researchers jointly identified three central themes expressing the participants' attitudes toward peer exclusion.

Results

In all the focus groups, the participants described a situation of ostracism. Most participants justified the ostracism, suggesting that the two boys in the story probably violated the group's behavioral rules and did not comply with the class's social norms. The children expressed this using the word "flow" and its various forms. Their words implied that "flowing" is the most important social ability for social integration into the peer group and attributed it to the popular children. In contrast, they felt that socially rejected children do not flow with the group norms and might even display opposition. Overall, the study identified three flow features in the class that can shed light on the phenomenon of peer exclusion during latency: reduction in the egocentric position and rise in the group's importance, flexibility with changing social norms, and ostracism when the children perceive a block in the "flow."

Reduction in the Egocentric Position and Rise in the Group's Importance

The children's words showed that socially popular children "flow" with the class, and the group's will be more important to them than their own: "Flowing—this means I don't care even if it's not something I want" (Ricky). Children in a flow state do not feel the need to be at the center or force their will upon the group. Instead, flow leads to the group functioning without conflicts. Conversely, some children take an egocentric position in situations without flow. They want to be at the center and force their will on the other children: "There are always some who have to be first and who are competitive and fight more, and there are the popular ones who flow" (Faith).

In contrast with the popular children, socially rejected children have no reduction in their egocentric position. They focus—insist upon—on their personal will. When the group does not accept their will, they act in a way that the class perceives as childish behavior.

They behave a bit babyishly. We actually tell them, "Come! We're playing a certain game." And then they don't want to and say no. They go away as if they were 3 years old. Or let's say we do something they do want, then they start jumping and screaming with joy, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" (Lara)

If, for example, we want something, and they don't agree, they start crying and getting offended, and this is unpleasant. . . . Kids who don't flow take offense. Some kids flow with what everyone wants and don't take offense. (Kelly)

These quotations show that the popular children do not respond personally or feel hurt when the group disagrees with their wishes—because they flow with the group's will. In contrast, socially rejected children take offense when the group does not accept their opinion.

They show off, and they are egotistical in soccer. . . . They want people to look at them more, to pay more attention to them. And then they don't pass. . . . Everyone shouts at them, but they think that everyone will cheer them. (Clive)

Clive's words showed that socially rejected children focus on themselves and seek to stand out, attract attention, and create admiration for their achievements. This behavior is unacceptable to their classmates and makes them angry. Jonathan noted, "Perhaps he has an

ego. Let's say he sees three players, he decides not to pass, decides to just go past them, not to notice anyone, and to score along. This is annoying."

The socially rejected children focus rigidly on their personal successes. They aim to be "stars," admired by the group. In contrast, socially popular children do not focus on themselves but flexibly join the dynamic group. They are sensitive and responsive to social messages. For example, they understand and accept the rules of the game as agreed in their class—to whom, when, and how to pass the ball.

Another difference between popular and rejected children is the ability to bear failure. Socially rejected children find it difficult to handle personal losses, situations in which they do not receive attention and admiration, or that cannot satisfy their need to be at the center. They are offended, cry, and are unable to put aside and move beyond their personal hurt. In contrast, popular children can handle a loss because they are not personally offended. When the group does not accept their wishes, they move on with the group.

There are some who lose and don't know how to lose honorably. So they say, "Well, that was just a warm-up and it was a joke. Now I'll do my real thing." . . . They insist, . . . each time another excuse. . . . They are not willing to lose honorably. In contrast, I would say, "That was a good game, and I'm going to keep playing." . . . Most of the time, if you lose honorably, you become more popular. If you cry because they won and not you, everyone fights with you. (Ben)

The children's statements showed that in a state of flow, the importance of the group increases as the egocentric position decreases. The children flow together while considering, helping, and cooperating with the group's needs. Lee explained, "Flowing means . . . saying, 'Great, whatever, we'll go with everyone.'" Ron mentioned that "the popular kids are better friends. . . . Let's say someone asks you for something, then you tell him, 'Sure, I'll happily do it.'"

In contrast with the children who respond positively to the group's demands and needs, the socially rejected children behave in ways the children interpret as meaning the group is unimportant to them, that they will not help or contribute to the group or cooperate with their friends. Leroy gave an example: "Let's say someone asks them for a favor, and they immediately say, 'No! No! Do it yourself.'" Roy mentioned, "They don't bring anything . . . and don't do what everyone told them to do." Susan added, "They don't cooperate with everyone."

The increased group importance makes the children who flow with the group focus on the group. They are aware of the group's situation, demands, and needs. In contrast, the socially rejected children do not recognize the group's importance or consider the group—which their classmates understand as a lack of caring. "When we do something together, instead of considering the class, he doesn't care about us" (Lenny).

Flexibility With Changing Social Norms

The participants' words showed that latency-age children flow flexibly with the group operating according to the class's social norms. For example, Ilan explained that "the popular children are fun and flow according to how everyone behaves, and the unpopular children don't flow." However, these norms change rapidly and cause changes in the group's direction of flow. One of the most significant areas of rapid change can be observed in the context of the class game:

There's a time when we play this game every recess. Then, one time we change it. Let's say from "catch," we changed to "cops and robbers." Then we'll only play "cops and robbers" and then move to another game. (Yossi)

Yossi's words show that the children change games, which is part of the group's natural movement. The social norms also change in the game's internal rules:

We stopped playing "cops and robbers" because there are kids who grab someone's hand or shirt really hard, and that's not pleasant. . . . We wanted to play "catch hide and seek" because you hide in a closed place, and then you can trap them and touch them gently. This is how we upgraded to "catch hide and seek." You hide, and then they find you, and you have to escape, and if they catch you, you become the cop. After that, we changed to "cops and robbers" again, but we upgraded the game. We didn't invent it; we just upgraded it. . . . We keep upgrading the game all the time. . . . Everyone upgrades together. . . . It's not that one person says, . . . not all at once. One of the kids thought of it; I'm not sure who. Each time, it's someone else. . . . Probably someone thought of it and then started telling everyone, and then everyone thought it was a good idea, so they all agreed with him. This way, each time we upgrade the game. (Yossi)

We stopped playing "cops and robbers" because the cops kept leaving the game because they said we were cheating. So now we don't do it, only if they give you a high five. Whoever is released is a robber. The released kid gives you a high five. We upgraded the game. Let's say that now there are undercover cops and undercover robbers. Let's say you think they are cops, but actually, they are robbers. This means that they are in prison guarding the robbers, and then they give them a high five without anyone noticing, and then they can escape. (Ariel)

Ariel presented the changes the children made in the game's rules because difficulties required them to find new, creative solutions. When the group felt a difficulty could disrupt the game, they created new solutions. According to that solution, the children could adapt to the new situation.

They perceived these changes as "upgrades," a word repeated often in this study. They said the changes they made to the rules of the game "upgraded" and "improved" it. The process of forming new social norms or changing existing ones appeared to occur through social rather than verbal communication. The children did not formulate difficulties, hold debates, or reach conclusions. Instead, the process happened through social communication, not in words.

Ariel's tone implied that he was proud of the children's ability to overcome obstacles and find successful solutions that improved the game. His words demonstrated the children's flexibility and "flowing together." The description was harmonious and fluid, expressing the group's self-efficacy and independence. The smooth flow was natural and enabled by the children's ability to find new solutions, be flexible, and adapt to these solutions.

The children reported having norms in various life areas and not only changing the rules but also creating new norms. For instance, a group of girls in a class created a new language:

It all started when one of the girls found a giant snail, and she decided to give it a name, I don't remember . . . Sammy. Then, it started developing more and more, and we started making up names for everything. (Faith)

The fifth-grade girls invented a unique language. They replaced ordinary words with their own words. They adapted themselves flexibly and rapidly adjusted to speaking the new language. Creating a new language was spontaneous, original, unexpected, and surprising. Flowing with the group trained the children to adapt to a reality of spontaneous, rapid, and unexpected changes.

To conclude, “flowing” with the changing class norms required flexibility and creativity—the bases of social competencies at this age. First, a need to create new social norms or change existing ones arose. The children instinctively perceived that need without words or explanations. Thus, they cooperated with their classmates to make the necessary changes. Finally, they flexibly adapted to the change and the new norms they were involved in creating.

Ostracism When the Children Perceive a Block in the “Flow”

The study participants’ words demonstrated that the classmates aimed for a situation where the whole class flowed together in the same direction. Group flow based on social norms creates social uniformity, with everyone behaving similarly (e.g., “All the kids wear Adidas,” “Everyone decides to wear jeans,” or “Everyone plays the same game during recess”).

The children who flow with group uniformity based on social norms for everyday life were popular. The society of children appreciated their ability to perceive and adapt the goals and motion of the group’s flow, which made these children leaders (class “kings” or “queens” or “popular” children).

In contrast, the socially rejected children did not integrate into the class uniformity or group flow based on the social norms and appeared divergent in various areas. The children described their divergence in speech: “[Socially rejected] kids speak a different language . . . of their own. . . . They speak differently. . . . When we talk in slang, they use high language. This isn’t the language we used every day.” They also described different humor:

They think they are funny, but they're not. Their humor really irritates the kids in class. . . . They laugh about strange things. Let's say they laugh at jokes they hear from their parents, and they tell the class, and the kids in class don't find it funny.

Similarly, there were differences in dedication to their studies: “Because they study more than everyone, . . . they are different and not like the rest of the class.” These children indeed diverged from the group flow and social uniformity but not deliberately. Their different behaviors stemmed from personality traits. They spoke, laughed, and studied in their own styles, which differed from the group’s. In contrast, and more serious, was the behavior of children who deviated and went “against the flow” intentionally. Such children were very different from most of the class. They opposed, fought, and argued with the society of children on purpose: “All the kids in our class . . . don’t want to go against the flow,” Liri stated, describing the condition of most children in the class. However, others described the behavior of children who did go against the flow: “Let’s say everyone wants to play ‘prisoners’ and ‘cops and robbers,’ and only two or three kids say no, and they start crying and getting angry. But they [the class] have decided” (Faith). “If, let’s say, the whole class wants to buy one gift, and they [the two rejected children] want to buy another gift, they can argue about this for a long time” (Shira).

Going against the flow can be deliberate. The children insisted on their own position and did not fit into the group's flow. This situation was serious because it was not incidental or related to personality traits but was a condition of constantly sparring with the group:

These two kids [who were not invited to the party] constantly annoy them [the class] . . . and are not willing to accept what they're told. Or the majority of the class wants to invite them to come and play, and they immediately say no! (Ronit)

The deviation Ronit described was constant. It stemmed from a deliberate war on the society of classmates. When the class children realized this resistance was systematic ("constantly annoy them"), they reacted more extremely. The constant opposing and fighting behavior, aimed at ruining the enjoyment and atmosphere in the class, awakened in the society of classmates a severe emotional response of disappointment, frustration, and anger: "They ruin the class atmosphere. . . . Like, we have a game, and they deliberately spoil the game for the whole class" (Rami).

Rami described a feeling of destruction and spoiling. The group game created an enjoyable atmosphere in the class, and the playing children passionately concentrated on their social game. They were detached from the external world and focused on enjoying the game (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The children who actively and systematically disturbed that "flow" ruined their engagement in the game and collapsed their classmates' feelings of enjoyment and happiness. This led to the severe reaction of peer exclusion.

Why do latency-aged children attribute such decisive importance to group flow? Some citations indicated the pleasure and engagement in the social game. One child provided a profoundly adult explanation of this issue:

[If we don't flow with the group,] perhaps this will continue throughout our life and bother us at work [when we're grown up]. Then we'll be alone at work. Then, when they ask, we'll just say, "I'll do it," and then I do it, and then you suddenly need help, and suddenly you say, "Ah, I don't have friends, and I need help." (Eliyahu)

Eliyahu's words showed that flowing with the group contributes to developing skills and competencies that have implications at a later age. From this viewpoint, peer exclusion was necessary to maintain the group. It was performed *for* the group, enabling it to flow together and thus contribute to their development as friends who live and act within groups as adults. "Perhaps this kid, in general, they ostracized him, and then he somehow returned to being a normal kid" (Danny).

Peer exclusion is a means of "correcting" the behavior of rejected children, bringing them back in line and making them behave "normally" (in their terms). From the society of classmates' perspective, "normal" children behaved according to the developmental norm—the children flowed uniformly with the group according to the social norms accepted in the class. The children did not perceive the rejected children as irreparable, having a personality flaw or fault that could not be changed. They condemned the behavior that deviated from social norms and used ostracism to make them change that behavior and adapt to the developmental move of flowing with the group. Once they adapted to flowing with the group, the class children would remove the ostracism and accept the rejected children back into the fold. "They [the rejected children] can be part of society . . . because they might not be now; . . . they change themselves."

When the group signaled by threatening peer exclusion, the socially rejected children changed themselves and started flowing with the group. However, they were unlike the popular children, who flowed happily with the group from the beginning rather than from necessity. Uri explained, “Popular kids want to be with everyone. . . . They are more involved, . . . they join more, . . . they play more. . . . If you ask them, they say, ‘happily.’” In contrast, socially rejected children changed their behavior due to social pressure: “It’s social pressure . . . because they are afraid that they will be ostracized. Because of social pressure, they eventually listen to the class” (Shira).

To conclude, the picture that arose from the study participants was that the society of children perceived peer exclusion as a necessary phenomenon directed at children with deviant behavior that harms the group flow. Through peer exclusion, pressure was exerted on the children perceived as weakening the class flow to make them “fall in line” with the rest of the class and flow with the group according to its norms. When those children eventually joined the group flow, they did so unenthusiastically. Unlike most of the class’s children, who flowed together with pleasure, the socially rejected children surrendered to social pressure and were forced, against their will, to flow with the class’s social norms. However, even though they did not join of their own free will, they were still accepted back into the group.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to clarify the meaning of “group flow” and its connection to development during latency and the peer exclusion phenomenon common in this age group. The research literature, with its various approaches, suggested viewing peer exclusion during latency as the result of a moral failing (Preti et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2006) or a destructive social dynamic (Killen et al., 2016; Rohlf et al., 2016). However, based on this study’s findings from the words of 140 children in 12 focus groups, we propose a new view: Peer exclusion is not the result of a failure but an action related to development during latency. This age is characterized by group flow, where most of the class’s children act as one body, flow with the norms accepted in the class, and aim for group uniformity. In contrast, socially rejected children do not flow with the class and, instead, insist on acting in their own way—even fighting for the rest of the class to follow them.

The children in the study implied that group flow exists under several conditions. First, flow depends on reducing the group members’ egocentric positions and on their willingness to surrender their individual will to the group. Second, it depends on raising the importance and value of the class in the children’s eyes as a result of understanding that the class provides value and meaning to their actions. Third, the children must be willing to do whatever is necessary for their class to be strong and cohesive. They must be sensitive to the class’s needs and act according to the social norms formed in the class, which change now and then according to changing contexts and needs.

The class children did not tolerate children who did not meet these conditions. Their attitude toward children who opposed the flow was negative and, in extreme situations, expressed as peer exclusion. The children used peer exclusion as a tool to make children who went against the flow change direction and flow with the class. They said the ostracism ended the moment rejected the children changed their behavior and started flowing with the group. Thus, peer exclusion is intended to encourage rejected children to move from an opposing and defiant position to a flexible position flowing with the group.

As noted earlier, group flow has not been studied in the contexts of development during latency or peer exclusion in this age group. However, in light of our findings, which reflect the authentic position of the children regarding peer exclusion, the possibility that peer exclusion is a developmental challenge children face during latency merits serious consideration. Challenges of the latency age include children surrendering the values and behavioral patterns

they have internalized (superego at the end of the Oedipal stage). Instead, they must assimilate, fit in, and flow with children of the same age—the class—whose social and rapidly changing values and behavior patterns can differ greatly from those the children internalized during infancy (Rutland & Killen, 2015, 2017).

According to classical dynamic theories, the personality with its three layers (id, ego, and superego) develops up to the latency age. Latency is considered an age when no new layers develop in the personality (Freud, 1926). However, this study's findings indicate the possibility that experiencing group flow during latency contributes to the development of another layer in the personality—the social self. We believe it is worth considering this idea and examining its contribution to understanding development during latency and the background for peer exclusion.

Our findings indicate a new developmental understanding: The social self develops during latency within and through the peer group—the class—which serves as a laboratory for experiencing the group social skills needed to exist as an individual in society (Fisher – Grafy, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2023c; Fisher – Grafy & Halabi, 2023a; Fisher – Grafy & Meyer, 2023b) The ability to flow with a group is the basis for developing these competencies. It involves reducing the egocentric position; listening, perceiving, and fulfilling the group's wishes and needs; developing flexibility (mental, emotional, and behavioral); finding creative solutions when facing obstacles or changing needs; adapting spontaneously to new situations; collective thinking; achieving group goals; and so on.

This study's findings shed new light on the peer exclusion phenomenon. They indicate that the class children are not abusive; they do not turn the rejected children into scapegoats. Peer exclusion does not result from a destructive dynamic, and the rejected children do not possess particular flaws that provoke the class children to reject them. Instead, peer exclusion protects the children's healthy and natural need to flow with social cohesion and develop a range of group social skills that enable them to grow a new layer of their personality—the social self (Fisher – Grafy, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2023c; Fisher – Grafy & Halabi, 2023a; Fisher – Grafy & Meyer, 2023b; Ruble et al., 2004; Sroufe & Cooper, 1988; Sroufe et al., 1992).

Our findings add to the research literature on flow. Like the features Csikszentmihalyi (1975) described, this study describes flow as a condition where people meld with the group and its activity. There is also a cancellation of the ego. However, whereas the research literature focused mainly on flow features among adults and revolved primarily around the contexts of work, music, and sports (Pels et al., 2018), our study suggests that group flow first develops during latency. It exists in all areas of the group's life and is essential for development during latency. Peer exclusion is applied when disturbances appear in the flow due to opposition from children who cannot relinquish their egocentric position (Fisher – Grafy, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2023c; Fisher – Grafy & Halabi, 2023a; Fisher – Grafy & Meyer, 2023b).

Another aspect that our study illuminated is that group flow is a condition the children naturally, joyfully, and enthusiastically join. We often tend to view individual children's joining a group as a situation expressing conformity and surrender resulting, in many cases, from social pressure (Asch, 1956; Bernard et al., 2015; Corriveau et al., 2013; Haun et al., 2014). The words of the children in this study implied that during latency, social pressure is felt among socially rejected children who are forced, against their will, to change their behavior and join the flow. However, most of the children described an experience of natural attraction to the group—engagement and enjoyment flowing with the group and its activities. During latency, flowing with the group results from an internal need to grow and develop. Delays or disruptions in that flow ruin their enjoyment, and they feel frustrated. In the flow state, children develop their social and group competencies. They flow with the group and change their behavior adaptively—and this behavior generally gives them pleasure and satisfaction.

Implications

This study has new educational and therapeutic implications. Our findings indicate that devoting time and resources to interventions focused on the pathological dynamic of the class or the rejected children can be of little benefit, considering the significant harm peer exclusion causes children. The normative developmental explanations in this study suggest a different starting point, enabling educators and parents to channel their resources more effectively (Espelage & Low, 2012). Interventions should aim to promote the developmental challenge of this age group: developing group flow and group social competencies.

Teachers can act on several levels. For example, at a prevention level, teachers can describe to the socially rejected children their behaviors that oppose the flow and often lead to peer exclusion (i.e., insisting on individuality, lack of cooperation with classmates, or deviating from class social norms). Teachers can explain and demonstrate how such behaviors disturb and disrupt the class flow (e.g., when the class decides to organize a party and asks each student to prepare something, but one child objects and refuses to cooperate or even ruins the activity the class has planned for everyone).

Teachers can suggest solutions to replace peer exclusion, such as a “social stop sign.” When a child is not flowing with class social norms, the class children can use the sign to attract that child’s attention to the direction of the group flow. Teachers might also adapt educational interventions for children who act as rejectors, rejected, or bystanders. For the socially rejecting children, teachers can encourage alternative activities by helping these children rephrase the peer exclusion itself as harming the group and by emphasizing the responsibility of each mature child to defend the group and avoid harming it. Teachers can suggest concrete proactive alternatives for handling situations where one child threatens the group flow without rejecting this child (e.g., having the class children explain how important it is for every class member to flow with the group and how opposition to the flow harms the group). Such interventions can be more effective when based on developmental understanding than assuming the children’s behavior is illogical, pathological, or immoral.

Limitations

This study offers unique insights based on latency-aged children’s perceptions of peer exclusion but has a few limitations. First, the sample was recruited using the snowball method; therefore, findings should be validated using quantitative methodology, including randomly selected large-scale representative samples. We are presently constructing written questionnaires based on the current qualitative study findings to provide complementary quantitative data. Second, researchers could extend inquiry beyond the children’s self-reports to other rating sources, such as peers, teachers, and parents, possibly using sociometric scales to determine possible correlations with the intensity of perceived developmental needs.

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Notes on Contributors

Dr. Hannah Fisher-Grafy – corresponding author– is an accomplished educational psychologist and psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of socially excluded children during the latency phase. She has devised a distinctive approach to individual and group therapy to effectively address and prevent social exclusion. Drawing upon decades of expertise, her enduring psychological interventions and social skills workshops have revealed limitations in mitigating the social exclusion encountered by these children. Her professional commitment revolves around formulating bespoke interventions meticulously tailored for this particular age group. This study was undertaken as a part of her doctoral research at Bar-Ilan University.

Dr. Rinat Halabi, an academic lecturer with decades of experience, is also an educational consultant by profession. She has grappled with numerous instances of social exclusion where she found the employed treatment methods unsatisfactory. Propelled by the belief that reconfiguring the approach toward social exclusion could yield transformative outcomes, she enthusiastically joined the research project.

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