

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT WITH DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS FROM
DIFFERENT ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS

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Abstract

Classroom management is a critical factor in ensuring effective teaching and learning, yet it becomes increasingly complex in culturally diverse settings where students come from different ethnic backgrounds. Disruptive behaviors—ranging from inattentiveness to defiance—are influenced not only by individual student characteristics but also by cultural norms, teacher expectations, and systemic inequities. Research demonstrates that minority students are disproportionately subject to disciplinary actions, often due to implicit bias and misinterpretation of culturally rooted behaviors. This paper explores the intersection of classroom management and ethnic diversity by examining how cultural differences shape perceptions of disruption, the role of teacher–student relationships in mitigating conflict, and the importance of peer dynamics in fostering classroom belonging. Drawing on empirical studies and international data, the findings suggest that culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) strategies—including restorative practices, culturally affirming pedagogy, and collaborative rule-setting—reduce disruptive incidents while promoting inclusivity. Projections indicate that by 2030, ethnic minority students will constitute nearly half of the student population in many OECD countries, underscoring the urgency of adopting CRCM frameworks. The study concludes that effective management in multicultural classrooms requires not merely discipline but an equity-driven approach that integrates cultural awareness, strengthens social bonds, and transforms diversity into an asset for academic and social development.

Keywords

classroom management, disruptive behavior, ethnic diversity, culturally responsive teaching, teacher–student relationships, inclusivity

Introduction

Classroom management is a cornerstone of effective teaching, directly influencing students' academic outcomes, social development, and emotional well-being. In increasingly multicultural classrooms, the challenge of managing disruptive students is amplified by the dynamics of ethnic diversity. Disruptive behavior—manifested through defiance, inattentiveness, aggression, or disengagement—can derail the learning process not only for the student in question but also for peers and teachers. Research indicates that classroom disruptions contribute to decreased instructional time, elevated teacher

stress, and weakened academic achievement (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). Furthermore, in ethnically diverse classrooms, these challenges intersect with cultural differences in communication styles, behavioral expectations, and teacher-student interactions, which necessitate nuanced strategies for effective management.

More than 25% of students in schools across Europe and North America (OECD, 2021; Fabina et al., 2023) come from ethnic minority backgrounds, and this percentage continues to rise globally. In contexts of such diversity, traditional “one-size-fits-all” disciplinary methods prove inadequate. Instead, culturally responsive classroom management is increasingly seen as essential for fostering inclusive learning environments. Studies by Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004) emphasize that teachers’ awareness of cultural differences in behavior norms is vital to interpreting student actions accurately and avoiding biases. For instance, what may be considered “disruptive” in one culture—such as speaking out of turn—could be interpreted as active engagement in another.

In addition to cultural interpretation, systemic inequities often exacerbate disruptive behaviors among minority students. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2018) and Owens & McLanahan, (2020) highlight that African American students are three times more likely to face suspensions or expulsions compared to their white peers, even for similar infractions. Such disproportionalities raise questions about implicit biases in disciplinary practices and their long-term impact on students’ educational trajectories. Hence, effective classroom management strategies must balance structure with cultural sensitivity, ensuring both equity and engagement.

This paper examines the complexities of managing disruptive students from different ethnic backgrounds, focusing on three dimensions: (1) the influence of cultural diversity on behavioral expectations, (2) the role of teacher-student relationships in mitigating disruptions, and (3) evidence-based, culturally responsive management strategies. By synthesizing research findings and highlighting best practices, the study aims to provide a framework for educators to address disruptive behaviors while promoting inclusivity and academic success.

Literature Review

The management of disruptive behavior in multicultural classrooms has been widely studied through the lenses of educational psychology, sociology, and intercultural pedagogy (Evans & Burke, 2024). Kounin’s (1970) early work on “withitness” emphasized the teacher’s ability to detect and address misbehavior before it escalates. However, more recent studies stress the importance of understanding how ethnicity and culture shape both teacher perceptions and student behavior (Gay, 2018).

Weinstein et al. (2004) argue that culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) rests on three pillars: recognition of cultural differences, integration of culturally relevant pedagogy, and equitable disciplinary practices. For example,

collectivist cultures often value group harmony and respect for authority, which may translate into high compliance with classroom norms. Conversely, students from individualistic backgrounds may display assertiveness that can be misinterpreted as disruptive.

Empirical studies further demonstrate the disproportionate disciplinary outcomes faced by ethnic minority students. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) and Pettit & Gutierrez, (2018) found that Latino and African American students are overrepresented in disciplinary referrals, not necessarily due to more frequent misbehavior, but because of differential teacher interpretations. This supports the academic risk hypothesis (Hamre & Pianta, 2005), which posits that minority students, given systemic challenges, are more vulnerable to academic and behavioral difficulties if teacher-student relationships are strained.

Moreover, peer dynamics play a crucial role. Thijs and Verkuyten (2013) revealed that students' identification with their classroom collective strongly correlates with reduced disruptive behaviors. In this sense, disruptions are not merely individual issues but also reflections of social integration and belonging. Teachers, therefore, must foster inclusive peer environments while simultaneously addressing individual behavior.

Discussion and Results

Analysis of recent data underscores that ethnic background significantly intersects with classroom behavior and disciplinary outcomes (Loyd et al., 2019). For instance, a meta-analysis by Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) revealed that teachers were more likely to interpret misbehavior by African American students as part of a problematic behavioral pattern, while identical actions by white students were often dismissed as isolated incidents. Such biases contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately affecting minority youth.

Nevertheless, proactive classroom management strategies show promising results. Culturally responsive practices, such as integrating students' cultural references into lessons, implementing restorative justice approaches, and using collaborative rule-setting, have been associated with significant reductions in disruptive incidents (Gregory et al., 2016). Furthermore, interventions that strengthen teacher-student relationships—such as daily positive interactions, culturally affirming communication, and empathy-based training—have been found to buffer the risk factors associated with minority status (Roorda et al., 2011).

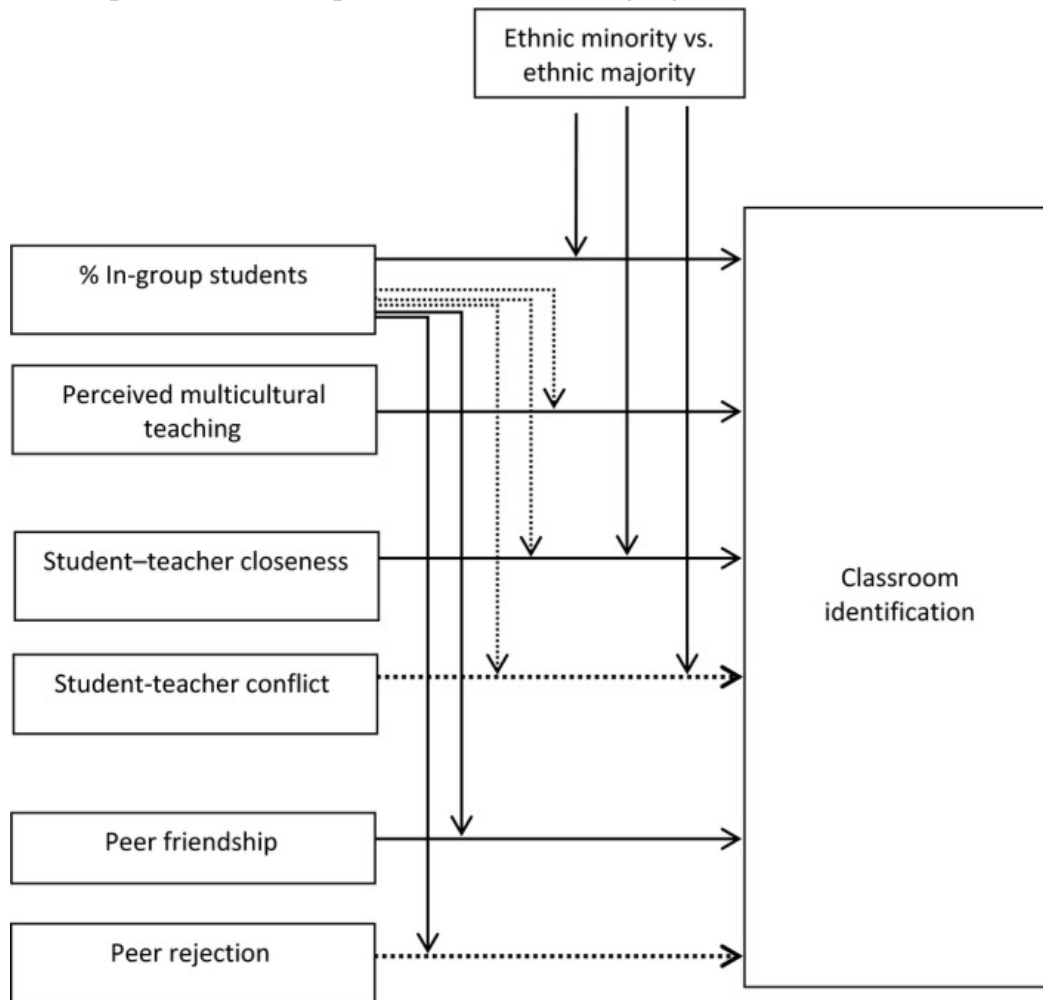
Looking forward, predictive models suggest that by 2030, classrooms in most OECD countries will be even more ethnically diverse, with minority students forming 40–45% of the school population (OECD, 2021). This trajectory underscores the urgency of developing robust frameworks for culturally responsive classroom management. If implemented effectively, such approaches can not only reduce disruptions but also foster higher levels of belonging, engagement, and academic achievement across ethnic groups.

There is a substantial body of evidence indicating that students' sense of belonging within the school environment plays a crucial role in both their emotional adjustment and academic achievement (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2016; Osterman, 2000). A strong connection to the school community not only satisfies the fundamental human need for relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but also enhances students' psychological well-being. Furthermore, it facilitates the internalization of academic values, thereby fostering the development of self-determined motivation toward learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

Although the literature on school belonging is extensive and provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. Firstly, scholars vary in their definitions and operationalizations of the construct. For instance, some view school belonging as a subdimension of school identification (Voelkl, 2012), while others use the two terms interchangeably (Allen et al., 2016). Similarly, while relationship experiences with peers and teachers are often considered central to the experience of belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), in some studies these relational perceptions are treated as precursors to school belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Voelkl, 2012). Secondly, a considerable portion of the research has focused on ethnic minority populations in an effort to explain persistent academic achievement gaps (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Booker, 2006). This emphasis is especially relevant in light of growing ethnic diversity across many societies worldwide (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have directly compared antecedents of school belonging across ethnic minority and majority groups (Hernández et al., 2017). For example, of the 51 studies reviewed in the meta-analysis by Allen et al. (2016), merely one explicitly tested the moderating influence of ethnicity. Thirdly, most empirical investigations have concentrated on adolescents, likely due to the pronounced decline in school belonging observed during that developmental stage. Yet, because school belonging demonstrates relatively strong rank-order stability over time (Anderman, 2003), it is also important to examine individual differences at earlier ages.

The present study sought to address these gaps by conducting a short-term longitudinal investigation (two waves, 4.5 months apart) among preadolescent students (ages 9–13) attending grades 4–6 in the Netherlands. The central aim was to explore ethnic group differences in school belonging by analyzing how children's classroom identification was associated with their relationships with both classmates and teachers (Wilson & Rodkin, 2011), and by comparing these associations between students of Turkish and Moroccan descent and their native Dutch peers. Turks and Moroccans constitute the largest non-Western immigrant groups in the Netherlands and are often characterized by relatively low socioeconomic status and exposure to significant prejudice (Gijssberts, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2012). Previous research indicates that, in comparison with ethnic Dutch students, Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch students

underperform across multiple educational outcomes, including standardized test scores in primary school, enrollment in academic rather than vocational secondary school tracks, and eventual levels of educational attainment (Gijsberts et al., 2012; van de Werfhorst & van Tubergen, 2007). Building on these disparities, the study developed a set of hypotheses regarding the interplay between classroom identification, student–teacher and peer relationships, and school belonging, which are summarized in Figure 1.



Classroom Identification, Peers, and Teachers

Goodenow and Grady (1993), in their seminal contribution to the literature, conceptualized *school belonging* as a “psychological sense of school membership” (p. 61). This framing highlights belonging as a form of identification with the school community, a social collective to which students feel emotionally connected (Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2017). Interestingly, however, Goodenow and Grady’s widely cited operationalization of belonging omits an explicit reference to identification, defining it instead as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). Subsequent research has sought to integrate these perspectives by examining classroom identification as a central dimension of children’s school belonging (Miller et al., 2017).

The classroom constitutes the most immediate and enduring social context for students, as they spend significant amounts of time with the same peers and often remain with them over multiple years (Greif Green et al., 2017; Tjaden et al., 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that classmates play a pivotal role in shaping the social and psychological development of (pre)adolescents. Empirical evidence suggests that most positive and negative peer interactions occur within, rather than across, classrooms (Stark, Leszczensky, & Pink, 2017). Moreover, peer groups function as salient social reference points, shaping students' norms, attitudes, and self-conceptions (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013). From the lens of social identity theory (Reynolds et al., 2017), classroom identification can therefore be understood as the cognitive and emotional significance students attach to their membership in the classroom collective. This sense of identification fulfills not only the fundamental need for relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) but also broader identity needs, such as self-esteem, meaning, distinctiveness, and efficacy (Vignoles, 2011). Importantly, such identification may contribute to stronger self-determined motivation toward learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and, in the long run, to enhanced academic achievement (Reynolds et al., 2017).

Although both classroom identification and social relationships are key components of school involvement, they represent conceptually distinct constructs. Identification captures a broader sense of group membership, whereas relationships capture the quality of interpersonal interactions. According to the rejection–disidentification model (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Solheim, 2009), individuals' identification with a group is contingent upon the degree of acceptance or rejection they experience from its members. Following this reasoning, children's identification with their classroom is likely influenced by their peer relationships, as peers embody the classroom group itself. Yet, teachers are also central actors in this process. Not only do they shape classroom peer dynamics through their management strategies, but they also exert a direct influence on students' sense of connection and bonding with school (Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, & Rodkin, 2014). In Dutch primary schools, where students typically spend an entire year with one or two teachers, the teacher is best understood as a significant member of the classroom collective. Thus, both peer and teacher relationships can be regarded as critical predictors of classroom identification.

Ethnic Group Differences

The *academic risk hypothesis* (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2005; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011) posits that relationships with teachers are particularly salient for students at elevated risk of academic underachievement. These students, due to heightened vulnerability, may rely more heavily on teacher support, making the quality of student–teacher relationships especially consequential (Bellato et al., 2025). Commonly cited risk factors include low socioeconomic status (SES), problematic behavior, and membership

in ethnic minority groups — the latter given persistent achievement disparities between majority and minority students.

With respect to ethnicity, empirical findings are somewhat mixed. Some studies suggest that teacher–student relationship quality is more strongly predictive of educational outcomes among ethnic minority students (den Brok, van Tartwijk, Wubbels, & Veldman, 2010; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). Yet meta-analytic evidence indicates that, overall, ethnicity does not consistently moderate the association between teacher relationships and academic motivation or achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Bedell et al., 2013). Still, certain studies have revealed that teacher support plays a disproportionate role in shaping school liking among specific minority groups (Murray, Waas, & Murray, 2008; (Halub et al., 2012). Importantly, the risks associated with ethnic minority status are often entangled with other contextual factors, including low SES (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013) and experiences of peer victimization (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). From an acculturation perspective, the underlying challenge may lie in the perceived cultural distance between students' home environments and the school context, which predominantly reflects majority-group norms, behaviors, and expectations (Chiu, Pong, Mori, & Chow, 2012; Vedder & Horenczyk, 2006). Teachers, who are typically members of the majority culture (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012), thus play a critical role in helping minority students bridge this gap.

The relative significance of teacher support may also depend on cultural orientations. One useful comparative dimension is *power distance* — the degree to which unequal power relations are accepted within a culture (Hofstede, 1991). Although distinct from each other, both Turkish and Moroccan cultures are characterized by relatively high power distance (Olaleye & Olusa, 2020). As such, Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch students are generally more inclined to defer to authority figures, such as teachers and parents, than their native Dutch peers (Pels, Nijsten, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2006; Thijs, 2011). While research has shown no systematic ethnic differences in students' perceptions of teacher relationship quality (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012), cultural orientations may nonetheless heighten the importance of teacher relationships for minority students' classroom identification. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the quality of student–teacher relationships will exert a stronger influence on classroom identification among Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch students compared to ethnic Dutch peers (Hypothesis 1). By contrast, peer relationships — which do not represent institutional authority — are not expected to show stronger associations with classroom identification among minority students.

Conclusion

Classroom management in multicultural settings requires a departure from traditional disciplinary frameworks toward approaches that recognize, respect, and integrate cultural diversity. Disruptive behavior among students from different ethnic

backgrounds is not solely a disciplinary issue but a complex interplay of cultural norms, systemic inequities, and teacher-student dynamics. By adopting culturally responsive strategies, strengthening relationships, and promoting inclusive peer environments, educators can transform disruptions into opportunities for growth and cross-cultural understanding.

Ultimately, effective management is not about silencing differences but about channeling them into constructive, respectful, and inclusive learning experiences. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, the development of such practices is not merely desirable but essential for the future of equitable education.

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