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# Inclusive classroom norms and children's expectations of inclusion of peers with learning difficulties in their social world

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## ABSTRACT

We examined whether inclusive classroom norms predicted children's reasoning and expectations about the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties from different perspectives (i.e., self, friends, and unfamiliar story protagonist). Swiss elementary school children ( $N = 1019$ ; 51% girls;  $M_{age} = 10.20$  years; Grades 3–6) shared their perceptions of inclusive classroom norms and answered questions regarding the inclusion of a character with learning difficulties in an academic scenario. Multilevel analyses revealed that children expected less inclusion from their friends (estimated  $OR = 0.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or the unfamiliar story protagonist (estimated  $OR = 0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than from themselves. Inclusive classroom norms positively predicted children's own (estimated  $OR = 3.17$ ,  $p = .041$ ) and their friends' inclusion expectations (estimated  $OR = 4.59$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Moreover, individuals who perceived higher inclusive norms than the classroom average were less concerned that the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties would threaten successful group functioning ( $\gamma = -0.19$ ,  $p = .011$ ). To target the inclusion of children with learning difficulties, school psychologists can heighten classmates' perceptions of inclusive norms and pay attention to individual differences in norm perception.

## 1. Introduction

The fundamental goal of inclusive education is to create equal learning opportunities for all children and to enable their participation in society, regardless of their social or ethnic background or their individual learning capacities (UNESCO, 1994). However, empirical work has documented that inclusive classrooms (i.e., where children with different learning capacities learn together) do not automatically guarantee that students with learning difficulties, who need additional and individualized support for learning, can equally participate in social and academic interactions with their classmates (Grütter et al., 2015; Juvonen et al., 2019). Various studies have demonstrated that compared to their classmates without learning difficulties, students with learning difficulties are less socially accepted (Krull et al., 2018), have a greater risk of being victimized (Estell et al., 2009), and tend to have lower social positions within their peer groups (Grütter et al., 2015). Moreover, lower social participation is a particularly salient issue in academic group tasks wherein students with learning difficulties are less likely to be included by classmates (Garrote, 2020; Gasser et al., 2017). Not being included in peer activities, or even suffering from negative peer experiences, has been linked to negative long-term health- and

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school-related consequences (Ladd et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2012).

Researchers have emphasized the prevention of such negative peer dynamics by providing a more detailed understanding of how children without learning difficulties reason about including or excluding peers with learning difficulties in academic contexts (Gasser et al., 2017; Mulvey et al., 2020). Although previous work on children's reasoning about social exclusion has primarily focused on ethnicity (e.g., Hitti & Killen, 2015), gender (e.g., Horn, 2019), and socio-economic status (e.g., Grütter, Dhakal, & Killen, 2022), there is still little known about social exclusion based on learning difficulties (Gasser et al., 2013, 2014, 2017; Mulvey et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research in this field is crucial to supporting school psychologists and educators in developing informed interventions and promoting inclusive practices in schools.

To address this research gap, the present study investigated Swiss elementary school children's inclusion expectations, moral judgment, and reasoning (i.e., how they coordinated fairness and equality concerns with group functioning concerns) regarding the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties in academic group tasks and how these facets were shaped by children's perceptions of inclusive classroom norms. The limited existing work on children with learning difficulties has indicated that when reasoning about their inclusion or exclusion in academic group tasks, children without learning difficulties consider negative consequences for the excluded peer as well as potential negative consequences for the group's functioning (Gasser et al., 2013, 2014, 2017; Mulvey et al., 2020). Importantly, relatively recent work has emphasized the significant role of classroom norms in children's concerns about effective group functioning wherein competitive norms longitudinally predicted greater exclusion of children with learning difficulties in academic contexts (Gasser et al., 2017). Building on these initial findings, we investigated the potential role of inclusive norms in shaping children's reasoning and expectations regarding inclusion.

In the present study we assessed children's expectations of inclusion by examining it from both their own perspective (i.e., "What would you do?") and a third-person perspective (i.e., "What would your friends/the story protagonist do?"). Assessing children's expectations from both the first- and third-person perspectives can reveal their understanding and beliefs about the inclusiveness of different references in their social world (Killen & Rutland, 2013). Moreover, children may also recall the normative behavior of their classmates as a reference for their predictions about inclusion within their social world (Galesic et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2021). Accordingly, we investigated whether children's predictions about their friends and the story protagonist would be shaped by their perception of inclusive classroom norms.

### 1.1. Children's expectations and reasoning about including peers with learning difficulties

When reasoning about who to include or exclude from a group activity, children are likely to consider social groups, such as one's gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013). When excluding peers based on concerns related to their group membership, their decision is often based on stereotypes associated with that social group (Grütter, Dhakal, & Killen, 2022; Nowicki et al., 2014; Peplak et al., 2017). For example, when asked why children believed that their peers might be excluded from a cognitively challenging group task, children in Grades 5–6 cited concerns regarding effective group functioning (e.g., "With children who have [learning] disabilities, the group works more slowly"; Gasser et al., 2014, p. 537). These concerns for group functioning are often based on stereotypical concerns (Nowicki et al., 2014) and are particularly salient in academic contexts (e.g., working on a difficult math task) compared to social contexts (e.g., going to the cinema), where academic outcomes are not at risk (Gasser et al., 2017).

The Social Reasoning Developmental (SRD) model (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Rutland & Killen, 2015) aims to identify when and why children may give priority to group concerns over moral concerns in socially complex situations. The model postulates that children coordinate three different domains when evaluating social issues, consisting of the (a) moral domain (e.g., fairness), (b) social domain (e.g., group concerns), and (c) psychological domain (e.g., autonomy). Studies within the SRD-framework consistently demonstrate that moral concerns are highly salient in elementary school children's reasoning about the inclusion of peers with (learning) disabilities in an academic group task (Chilver-Stainer et al., 2014; Gasser et al., 2014, 2017). In straightforward inclusion situations, when given the choice between including or excluding a child with (learning) disabilities, almost all children decided to include the child with the (learning) disability, judging potential exclusion as wrong for moral reasons (Gasser et al., 2013). This finding suggests that children exhibit a moral understanding of the importance of inclusion. However, in contrast to such straightforward judgments about right or wrong, real-life inclusion situations are often more complex and ambiguous (Mulvey, 2016). Real-life situations may involve additional concerns, such as balancing the desire to be inclusive with the pressure of conforming to competitive group norms (Gasser et al., 2017). To capture this real-life complexity, researchers have employed more ambiguous inclusion scenarios. In these scenarios, children must decide between including a member from a group they strongly identify with (i.e., ingroup) or a member from a group they do not identify with (i.e., outgroup; e.g., Grütter, Dhakal, & Killen, 2022). For example, they might choose between including a child with (i.e., outgroup) and without (i.e., ingroup) learning difficulties. Compared to straightforward inclusion scenarios, first to sixth graders have more frequently expressed concerns about effective group functioning in forced-choice scenarios and less frequently included peers with learning disabilities (Gasser et al., 2013, 2014). This evidence is consistent with extensive research on the SRD framework, documenting that group concerns often conflict with children's inclusiveness of outgroup members, despite judging their exclusion as morally wrong (Mulvey, 2016; Rutland et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022).

Importantly, children are attentive to contextual cues, such as group norms, when reasoning about complex social situations (Rutland et al., 2022). During mid and late childhood, such normative cues become more salient to children's reasoning about inclusion (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey and Hitti, 2013). Consistent with this idea, children in fifth- and sixth-grade elementary schools were more likely to prioritize concerns about effective group functioning over moral concerns in classrooms with higher competitive norms, corresponding to a lower expected inclusion of children with learning difficulties in academic group tasks (Gasser

et al., 2017). To expand on these findings, through the present study, we aimed to contribute new evidence regarding the role of inclusive norms and whether these norms might shape children's reasoning about inclusion.

### 1.2. Inclusive classroom norms and children's reasoning about inclusion

Classroom norms guide children's behaviors and attitudes by conveying group consensus about what is appropriate or typical (Veenstra & Lodder, 2022). Children infer this group consensus (i.e., the classroom norm) through an ongoing dynamic process of generating beliefs about their classmates' opinions and behaviors (Prentice & Paluck, 2020). Such inferences can be based on other students' statements of what ought to be done (i.e., *injunctive norm*) or on children's observations of what other students actually do (i.e., *descriptive norm*; Cialdini et al., 1991). Research has shown that particularly descriptive norms account for various socialization processes in the classroom by guiding individuals' behaviors, such as bullying behavior (Sentse et al., 2015), prosocial behavior (Busching & Krahé, 2020), and children's expectations about inclusion (Gasser et al., 2017, 2018).

Descriptive norms can be measured in various ways, either by assessing students' individual behaviors or attitudes and aggregating these constructs within the classroom, which represents a measure of the *actual norm* (e.g., Gasser et al., 2017; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016), or by assessing individuals' *subjective perception of the norm*, and aggregating this perception within the classroom (e.g., Gasser et al., 2018; Thijs & Wiemers, 2023). Importantly, an individual's perceived norm does not always align with the actual norm as individuals have no direct access to the attitudes and behaviors of other group members and must rely on inferences (Dillon & Lochman, 2022). Consequently, children's inferences about norms may be based on their experience with similar others (Schulze et al., 2021) or their own behaviors and attitudes (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016). Accordingly, recent research has revealed that complete agreement on norm perception within the same classroom is very rare as individuals often deviate from the shared agreement due to their own unique perceptions and biases (Gasser et al., 2018; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016). When measuring children's norm perception, it is thus important to assess both the unshared and shared components of children's norm perception, enabling researchers to tap into children's personal understanding of norms, regardless of its accuracy (Thijs & Wiemers, 2023). Using this approach, a recent study on anti-prejudice classroom norms and children's ethnic outgroup attitudes showed that children's shared and unshared norm perceptions predicted their attitudes concurrently, whereas only the shared norm perception predicted children's attitudes longitudinally (Thijs & Wiemers, 2023). Moreover, Gasser et al. (2018) revealed that both shared and unshared perceptions of inclusive classroom norms explained fifth- and sixth-graders' inclusive attitudes toward children with behavioral problems 1 year later. In addition to the importance of considering both shared and unshared components when evaluating the impact of inclusive classroom norms, including children's unshared norm perception further helps to avoid systematic biases when interpreting aggregated classroom norms in statistical analyses (Marsh et al., 2012).

Based on these insights, in the present study, we disentangled children's norm perception into both shared and unshared norm components and investigated whether they corresponded to children's expectations and reasoning about including peers with learning difficulties. Acknowledging that social perception contains a subjective component (Schulze et al., 2021; Thijs & Wiemers, 2023), we further examined whether children's experiences with inclusion in their classroom might shape their expectations of inclusion within their social world.

### 1.3. Inclusive classroom norms and children's expectations within their social world

The classroom constitutes an important reference group in children's lives as children spend a lot of time with their classmates and have meaningful interactions with them (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013). However, children are not only part of the classroom, but also belong to other social groups (e.g., family groups, peer groups; Bronfenbrenner, 1992). To dynamically adapt to their environment, children need to infer which behaviors are normative in different social contexts (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). Therefore, they require the ability to differentiate between multiple perspectives in social relations (Abrams et al., 2009). Although children in late childhood possess such social-perspective-taking abilities that allow them to distinguish that different contexts may have different norms (Abrams et al., 2009), they might draw on previous experiences in one context when making predictions about another context (Thijs & Wiemers, 2023).

Thus, according to social sampling theory, children may recall behaviors exhibited by salient reference groups in their lives when making inferences about their social world (Galesic et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2021). Given that the classroom is a significant reference group for children, they may base their expectations of inclusion on their experiences in the classroom. To explore this possibility, we assessed children's expectations of inclusion not only from their own perspective (i.e., "What would you do?"), but also from the perspectives of two different social groups consisting of their friendship circle (i.e., "What would your friends do?") and broader society (i.e., "What would the story protagonist do?"). By doing this, we aimed to determine whether the perception of inclusive norms contributes to higher expectations of inclusion beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Hence, we explored whether children who observed inclusive norms toward children with learning difficulties in their classroom would be more likely to expect similar inclusivity among their friends, and potentially even in broader society.

### 1.4. The present study: children's reasoning about inclusion of peers with learning difficulties in Switzerland

We examined how children reason about the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties from different perspectives, specifically focusing on their inclusion expectations, moral judgments, and reasoning (Research Question 1). Additionally, we assessed whether the perception of inclusive classroom norms would predict their inclusion expectations from different perspectives, as well as their

reasoning (Research Question 2). To measure children's reasoning about inclusion, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario about an academic group task in school (adapted from Gasser et al., 2017) that required a decision between including a child with and a child without learning difficulties. Children predicted who they would include and provided reasons for their inclusion expectation. Additionally, they made predictions and judgments from two other perspectives, including considering who their friends (representing a meaningful social group in their lives) and who the story protagonist (representing society in general) would include.

We investigated children's reasoning about inclusion in the upper elementary grades in Switzerland. In the Swiss education system, inclusive classrooms were established after 2002 when a new law prescribed the equal treatment of people with disabilities (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2020). Currently, approximately 5% of all obligatory school students receive intensive additional support by a teacher with additional competencies in special needs education (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2020). However, despite efforts to make schools more inclusive, the Swiss education system separates students above Grade 6 into an ability-tracked system for secondary education, increasing the salience of academic achievement for students through the upper grades of primary school. Students' awareness of the importance of their grades for this upcoming transition may have implications for both their own inclusivity and their expectations about references in their social world, such as their friends and third-party characters. For example, children in Grade 3 preferred to collaborate with higher- rather than lower-achieving students in their own classroom for academic group tasks (Garrote, 2020). In addition, Gasser et al. (2017) reported a decreasing inclusion of children with learning difficulties in academic group tasks from Grades 5–6, with heightened concerns about group functioning. Considering that exclusion based on learning difficulties may be deemed more acceptable when academic outcomes are at stake (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019), it is important to better understand how Swiss children navigate within an educational system that may send conflicting messages about the importance of inclusion and academic performance.

In addition to these contextual considerations that may increase the perceived salience of academic performance and group functioning, we targeted children between 8 and 13 years of age because children at this age exhibit increased peer orientation and sensitivity to group norms (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Ruggeri et al., 2018). Hence, during this developmental period, children might be more susceptible to classroom norms, increasing the potential for teachers and school psychologists to promote inclusive classroom norms. Lastly, we focused on this age group to ensure that children had sufficient perspective-taking abilities to be able to differentiate between multiple perspectives in social relations (Abrams et al., 2009). Considering potential differences in children's reasoning about inclusion from a developmental perspective, we controlled for children's individual age in our study.

With regard to Research Question 1 and drawing on previous findings that highlighted children's tendency to evaluate themselves more positively than others (Brown, 2012; Gasser et al., 2017; Levy et al., 2021; Sandstrom et al., 2013), we hypothesized that children would expect a higher degree of inclusion of the child with learning difficulties when making predictions from their own perspective, as opposed to when predicting for their friends and the story protagonist (Hypothesis 1a [H1a]). Also, based on well-documented findings related to children's sensitivity toward disability-based exclusion (Chilver-Stainer et al., 2014; Gasser et al., 2013), we predicted that children would judge the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties as more acceptable than the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties (H1b), hence rejecting exclusion based on group membership (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Sims et al., 2022). Regarding children's reasoning about their inclusion expectations, we assumed that children who expected the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties would be more likely to agree with moral reasons than children who expected the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties (H1c). Conversely, we hypothesized that children who expected the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties would be more likely to agree with reasons related to effective group functioning than children who expected the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties (H1d; Gasser et al., 2017; Mulvey et al., 2020).

To investigate whether inclusive classroom norms corresponded to children's reasoning and expectations about inclusion (Research Question 2), we assessed inclusive classroom norms by presenting children with another hypothetical exclusion scenario that measured their perceptions of their classmates' reactions to a character with learning difficulties being alone or bullied by other classmates (adapted from Gasser et al., 2018). To methodologically reflect that norm perception contains a collective as well as an individual component, we disentangled children's shared perception (i.e., agreement within the classroom) from their unshared perception (i.e., individual deviation) of the norm (Lüdtke et al., 2009; Thijs & Wiemers, 2023). Importantly, all hypotheses pertaining to Research Question 2 were analyzed for both the collective and individual norm perceptions. We predicted that higher perceptions of inclusive norms would be associated with greater inclusion of the child with learning difficulties, irrespective of whether children made predictions for themselves or from the perspectives of their friends or the story protagonist (H2a). Regarding their predictions for themselves, this hypothesis was informed by previous peer-socialization studies that have demonstrated a link between classroom norms and individuals' inclusive expectations (e.g., Gasser et al., 2017, 2018). Concerning expectations regarding inclusion from the perspectives of their friends and the protagonist, we assumed that children would recall the classroom as an important reference group (Galesic et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2021). Finally, we hypothesized that inclusive classroom norms would predict children's reasoning (Gasser et al., 2017). Specifically, higher perceptions of inclusive norms would be linked to a greater agreement with moral reasons (H2b) and a decreased agreement with reasons about group functioning (H2c).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

The full sample consisted of 1019 students ( $M_{age} = 10.20$  years,  $SD_{age} = 1.29$ , age range = 8–13) from 67 primary school classes (Grades 3–6,  $M_{classroom\ size} = 17.73$  students,  $SD = 2.84$ , classroom size range = 12–25), representing 57 schools (1–3 classrooms per school) in central Switzerland. Among the students, 51% ( $n = 523$ ) identified themselves as girls, 49% ( $n = 493$ ) as boys, and less than

1% as non-binary ( $n = 3$ ). Specific to migration background, 61% ( $n = 620$ ) identified themselves as non-immigrant Swiss students (i.e., Swiss nationality only). Thirty-eight percent ( $n = 383$ ) had a migration background (i.e., 17% Swiss nationality and at least one other nationality; 21% other nationalities only) and no information was available for the remaining 1% ( $n = 16$ ) of the sample. The nationalities most frequently reported by children with a migration background included Germany (13%,  $n = 58$ ), Italy (12%,  $n = 55$ ), Kosovo (11%,  $n = 50$ ), Serbia (6%,  $n = 28$ ), Macedonia (6%,  $n = 28$ ), and Portugal (6%,  $n = 26$ ). Seventy-four percent of the sample ( $n = 749$ ) reported speaking German or Swiss German at home with their parents or primary caregivers, whereas about 8% ( $n = 77$ ) exhibited difficulties related to German as a second language.

Additionally, 57 teachers provided data regarding learning difficulties in their school classes through questionnaires. Children were classified as having learning difficulties based on two criteria that are part of the official documentation scheme of special needs education in the Swiss educational statistics, are among the most frequently used measures to support students with special needs, and both require a formal diagnostic process (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2020); these two criteria include (a) having reduced learning goals in at least one subject (i.e., not being able to conform with the minimal requirements for the respective grade in a specific subject;  $n = 67$ ) and/or (b) receiving intensive additional support by a special education teacher (usually these teachers have an additional degree in special needs education;  $n = 13$ ). Some children met both criteria. As a result, 7% of the sample were identified as having learning difficulties.

During the recruitment process, 167 teachers of Grades 3–6 were invited via email to participate in the study. These teachers were selected from the database of a collaborative school network in which schools collaborate with the university for teacher education for primarily educational and research purposes. Of these 167 teachers, 75 agreed to participate with their school classes. However, due to some teachers’ personal reasons (e.g., accident, illness, change of job), eight school classes ultimately did not take part in the study.

From the participating 67 classrooms, primary caregivers received written information about the study in the most frequently spoken foreign languages in this region of Switzerland (i.e., English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Serbo-Croatian) and were asked to provide written consent for their child’s participation. In addition, children were asked for their verbal assent (with children above the age of 11 years providing written assent) and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, that their data would be treated confidentially, and that their participation was completely voluntary. Out of the parents and children approached, 169 students did not participate in the study because their parents ( $n = 139$ ) or the students themselves ( $n = 30$ ) did not provide consent or assent. As a result, the average participation rate per classroom was 89% ( $SD = 12%$ , range = 42%–96%).

2.2. Procedures

The procedure for the study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Zurich (Number: 19.12.11). During school hours, children completed an online questionnaire supervised by their teacher that took approximately 20–30 min to

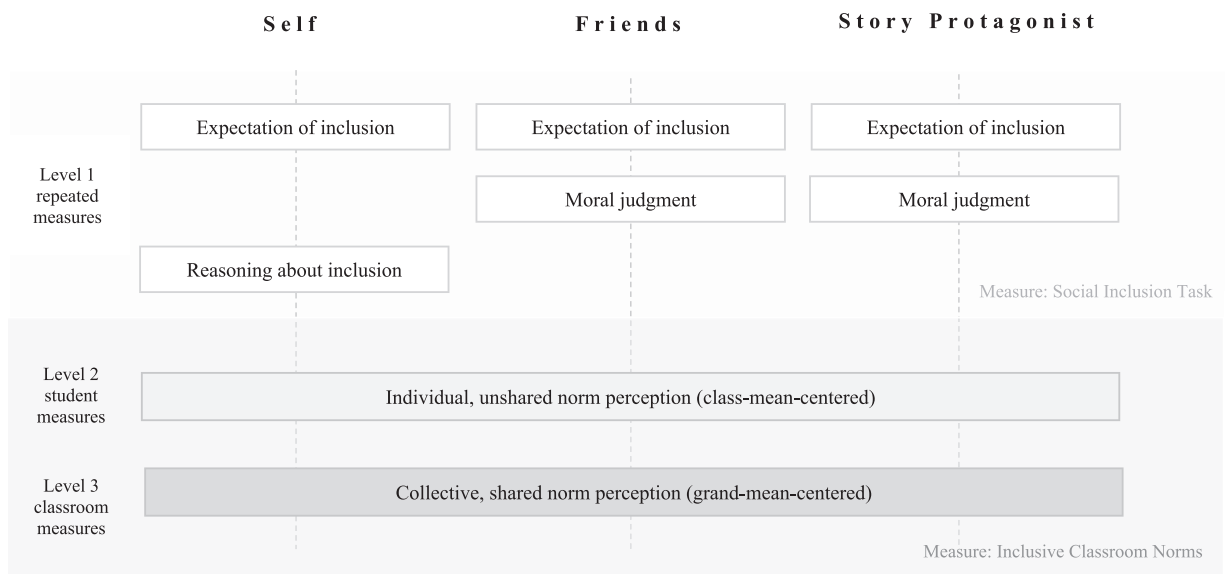


Fig. 1. Study design with main study variables.

Note. In the upper box (Level 1), the measures represent the data collected based on the social inclusion task, which included the expectation of inclusion, moral judgment, and reasoning about inclusion. Because these measures were assessed for multiple perspectives (i.e., self, friends, and story protagonist) or multiple reasons (i.e., moral or group reasons) they are considered repeated measures at Level 1. In the lower box, Level 2 and Level 3 are presented. At these levels, the norm variable is displayed, which was measured based on a 6-item scale (for details, see Supplementary Materials 2). This norm variable was divided into the individual and the collective norm perception. The individual, unshared norm perception varies between students and is therefore arranged at Level 2. The collective, shared norm perception differs between classrooms and is thus placed at Level 3.



complete. Those students who did not assent to participate in the study conducted alternative school tasks. Teachers who were briefed by the research team answered any remaining questions during the experiment. Students with learning difficulties and students who had difficulties related to German as a second language received support from a special education teacher in filling out the questionnaire. To ensure that the children included in our study fully understood our tasks, we implemented a control question (for details, see the Measures section). If the children provided the wrong answer to the first control question, the scenario was explained a second time and the children were asked the control question again. Only those children who correctly answered the control question, either on their first or second attempt, were included in our analysis. As a result, the initial full sample of 1019 students was reduced to 964 students from 67 classrooms, which constituted the final sample for our statistical analysis. We conducted statistical analyses to examine potential differences in demographics between students who answered the control question correctly and those who did not. The results of these analyses and additional sample characteristics (see Supplementary Materials 1) revealed that the control question did not significantly affect the representativeness of the final sample for our statistical analysis.

### 2.3. Measures

Fig. 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the study design, illustrating the main study variables and their corresponding measurement instruments, which are further described below.

#### 2.3.1. Social inclusion task

Children's inclusion expectations, moral judgment, and reasoning were assessed using a social inclusion scenario (adapted from Gasser et al., 2017) where hypothetical peers engage in an academic group task. The scenario was gender-matched and accompanied by pictures of the story protagonists. Non-binary children ( $n = 3$ ) were given the choice to select their preferred scenario. The girl scenario consisted of the following: "During a math lesson, children have to work on difficult tasks in groups of three. Karla and her friend want to work together and are looking for a third child to complete the group. Petra and Denise both want to join the group. Petra has difficulties at school. She needs more time and help to complete academic tasks. By contrast, Denise is good at school." Children were then asked a control question (i.e., "Who has difficulties at school?"); if answered incorrectly, the inclusion scenario was presented a second time. Only those children who answered the control question correctly either on their first or second attempt were included in our analysis (for details, see the Procedures section).

**Expectation of Inclusion.** Based on the scenario, children predicted the inclusion from the perspective of (a) self ("If you were the protagonist [e.g., Karla], who would you choose?"), (b) their friends ("Who do you think most of your friends would choose to join the group?"), and (c) the story protagonist ("Who do you think the protagonist [e.g., Karla] would choose to join the group?"). The responses were coded as 0 (inclusion of the child without learning difficulties) and 1 (inclusion of the child with learning difficulties).

**Moral Judgment About Inclusion.** Children provided judgments regarding their expectations of inclusion from both their friends and the story protagonist ("What do you think – is it OK or not OK if most of your friends/the protagonist [e.g., Karla] chose [the included child]?"). Their responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Very much not OK*) to 3 (*Very much OK*).

**Reasoning About Inclusion.** Students evaluated the reasons for why they chose either the child with or without learning difficulties when deciding from their own perspective. Drawing from the SRD model (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Rutland & Killen, 2015) and previous research on children's reasoning about the inclusion of children with learning difficulties (Gasser et al., 2017), two different statements were presented to the children: (a) a moral statement justifying the inclusion ("Because otherwise, it would be unfair and [the included child] might be sad") and (b) a statement about effective group functioning, referring to the negative consequences for the group if the other child were to join instead ("Because one cannot work well with [the child that was not included]"). For each statement, children indicated how much they agreed on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Very much*).

**Table 1**

ICC1 and ICC2 values for the outcome variables.

	Inclusion expectation (binary)	Moral judgment (continuous)	Reasoning about inclusion (continuous)	Inclusive classroom norm (continuous)
ICC1: Variability between...				
... classrooms (Level 3)	.02	.01	.01	.09
... students within classrooms (Level 2)	.27	.35	.28	
ICC2: Reliability of aggregated variables within...				
... classrooms (Level 3): shared classroom norm perception				.59

*Note.* To examine how much of the total variability in the outcome variables could be attributed to variability between the clusters in our study (i.e., classrooms and students within classrooms), we calculated ICC1 values (Bliese, 2000). For instance, regarding inclusion expectations, 2% of the total variance was attributed to differences between classrooms, indicating that children within one classroom responded differently compared to children in another classroom. This proportion increased to 27% when additionally considering the variance between individual students, signifying that individual students responded differently. Consequently, the remaining 73% could be attributed to variability in students' responses to the three perspectives. As the norm variable was assessed at Level 2 (i.e., nested within classrooms) we only calculated ICC1 values for the variability between classrooms. In addition to the ICC1 values, we also calculated an ICC2 value for the shared classroom norm variable that was aggregated at the classroom level. The calculation of ICC2 is important to assess the degree to which aggregating students' perceptions form a reliable classroom aggregate (Bliese, 2000).

### 2.3.2. Inclusive classroom norms

Children's perception of the descriptive, inclusive classroom norm was assessed using a different gender-matched scenario (adapted from Gasser et al., 2018). This scenario depicted three different situations in which a child with learning difficulties was either alone or bullied. The being alone scenario (version for boys) was "Severin is a new boy in your class. He has great difficulties at school and needs help to complete academic tasks. Imagine that all the children have to work on math tasks in groups. Severin sits at his desk and participates in none of the groups."

Following each situation, children used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*No one*) to 3 (*All of them*) to indicate their classmates' expected reactions to two items, including (a) "How many children from your school class would include Severin in their group?", and (b) "How many children from your school class would feel sorry for Severin for sitting alone at his desk?". Consequently, a total of six items were recorded and subsequently aggregated to form the inclusive classroom norm variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ; for a full list of the situations and items, see Supplementary Materials 2). This inclusive norm variable was assessed through a system-level approach that uses the classroom as a referent, which enables the aggregation of children's norm perception at the classroom level (Marsh et al., 2012). To ensure a meaningful aggregation of children's perceptions within each class, it was important to consider the extent to which these perceptions formed a reliable classroom aggregate (Lüdtke et al., 2009). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC2) value of .59 indicated moderate agreement among children in the same classroom, suggesting variability in how they perceived the norm (see Table 1). To address this variability and account for the subjective component of individual norm perception, we systematically disentangled the collective, shared perceptions of the classroom norm from children's individual, unshared perceptions (Gasser et al., 2018; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016).

**Collective, Shared Perception of the Classroom Norm.** This variable represented the average (aggregated) norm perception within each classroom. To facilitate comparisons between classrooms, we centered each classroom score at the grand mean across all classrooms (grand  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ , range =  $-0.60$ – $0.53$ ). Positive scores indicated that a classroom had a higher collective perception of the inclusive norm compared with the average classroom, whereas negative values indicated a lower collective perception of the norm.

**Individual, Unshared Perception of the Classroom Norm.** This variable measured the extent of individual deviation from the classroom average. It was calculated by subtracting each individual's perception of the norm from the corresponding class mean, with the values centered around the respective class mean (class  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ , range =  $-1.64$ – $1.39$ ). Positive scores indicated that individual's perception was higher than the classroom average, whereas negative scores indicated that it was lower.

### 2.3.3. Control variables

We considered four control variables in our statistical analyses: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) migration background, and (d) own learning difficulties. We controlled for students' gender (0 = boys, 1 = girls) due to previous studies invoking gender differences in their reasoning about social inclusion (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2020). Age (grand-mean-centered) was included to account for developmental changes in children's norm perception and perspective-taking abilities (Abrams et al., 2009; Killen, Rutland, et al., 2013). We also considered children's migration background (0 = Swiss nationality only, 1 = migration background) as this may influence their sensitivity toward the inclusion of minority group members (Malti et al., 2012).

Additionally, we considered children's own learning difficulties (0 = no learning difficulties, 1 = learning difficulties) as a control variable because their expectation of including peers with learning difficulties may differ when representing the minority group with learning difficulties (Gasser et al., 2017). Unfortunately, information about children's learning difficulties was unavailable for 14% of the sample due to 10 missing teacher questionnaires. Due to this large proportion of missing data, we did not include learning difficulties as a covariate in our statistical models. Nevertheless, we did control for the potential effects of this control variable by comparing models with and without learning difficulties (see Supplementary Materials 3).

## 2.4. Data analytic strategy

### 2.4.1. Model selection

Given the different metrics of our outcome variables, we employed two distinct statistical approaches; the dichotomous outcome variable (i.e., inclusion expectation) was analyzed using binomial generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs), whereas the two metric outcome variables (i.e., moral judgment and reasoning) were analyzed using linear mixed-effects models (LMMs). All analyses were performed in the R statistical environment (R Core Team, 2022) using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015).

### 2.4.2. Controlling for the hierarchical structure of the data

To account for the hierarchical structure of the data (see Fig. 1), multilevel modeling was chosen. Specifically, the design included repeated measures (Level 1) from students (Level 2) within classrooms (Level 3). For correlations among the main study variables at Level 1, see Supplementary Materials 4. To determine the significance of controlling for between-level variance, we examined the variability in the outcome variables across the three levels of analysis (Bliese, 2000). Therefore, we fitted two intercept-only models for each outcome variable; these models included one model with a fixed intercept and one with a random intercept, which allowed the outcome variable to vary between classrooms and students. Likelihood ratio tests revealed that the models with random intercepts provided a significantly better fit to the data than the models with fixed intercepts (inclusion expectation:  $\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 95.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; moral judgment:  $\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 89.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ; reasoning:  $\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 521.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Bliese, 2000). The intercept-only models with random intercepts were additionally used to calculate ICC1 values. These values represent the proportion of total variability in the outcome

variables that can be attributed to variability between the clusters. In our study, these were classrooms (Level 3) and students within classrooms (Level 2). Table 1 displays the ICC1 values. Despite the relatively low variability between classrooms, we included this level in our analyses due to the inclusion of a central predictor variable (i.e., collective norm perception) at the classroom level. Similar studies on classroom effects have reported comparable ICC1 values (Gasser et al., 2018; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013). For more information on the calculation of the ICC1 values, see Supplementary Materials 5.

#### 2.4.3. Stepwise approach and control variables

Following the recommendations of Bliese (2000), we employed a stepwise approach for model construction. First, we included the control variables mentioned above (i.e., gender, age, and migration background) into the model. Second, we added the predictor variables, and in the third step, the interactions of interest. Because there was a significant amount of data missing for the control variable learning difficulties and because the lme4 package excludes missing data listwise, 10 school classes would have been omitted from the analyses as there were no teacher questionnaires with information on children's learning difficulties available. To maximize the sample size and enhance the statistical power, we computed the statistical models without learning difficulties as a control variable. To understand whether children's own learning difficulties were a significant covariate in our analyses, we conducted additional modeling that included learning difficulties as a control variable. A comparison of the models with and without learning difficulties revealed that omitting this control variable did not significantly affect the results nor the interpretation of our hypotheses (for details about these analyses, see Supplementary Materials 3).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Inclusion expectation

##### 3.1.1. Inclusion expectation from different perspectives

Research Question 1 investigated children's reasoning about the inclusion of children with learning difficulties and whether their inclusion expectation varied when considering different perspectives. As shown in Table 2, children expected a higher degree of including the child with learning difficulties when making predictions from their own perspective compared to when making predictions for their friends or the story protagonist. To determine the statistical significance of this difference, we computed a binomial GLMM, which predicted children's inclusion expectations (1 = child with learning difficulties) by perspective (self = reference category).

The results of this model provided support for H1a as the child with learning difficulties was approximately seven times (e.g.,  $1/0.14 = 7$ ) more likely to be included when children made predictions for themselves compared to their friends or the story protagonist. Furthermore, those children identifying as girls and children with a migration background were significantly more likely to include the child with learning difficulties compared to boys and children without a migration background, respectively (see Table 3, Step 1).

##### 3.1.2. Perceived inclusive classroom norms and inclusion expectation

To investigate whether inclusive classroom norms predicted children's inclusion expectations (Research Question 2), we added children's individual and collective norm perception into the GLMM in the second step. The results showed a significant main effect for both individual and collective norm perception (see Table 3, Step 2). Because our hypothesis (H2a) stated that inclusive norms would predict children's inclusion expectations across all three perspectives, we included two cross-level interactions in the model. These interactions examined the impact of norms separately for each perspective, incorporating the interaction between perspective and

**Table 2**

Descriptive information on the outcome variables.

	Overall	Inclusion expectation	
		Child with learning difficulties	Child without learning difficulties
Perspective			
Self		69%	31%
Friends		37%	63%
Story protagonist		38%	62%
Moral judgment ( <i>M, SD</i> )			
Friends	1.81 (0.94)	2.34 (0.77)	1.51 (0.90)
Story protagonist	1.53 (1.02)	2.13 (0.93)	1.19 (0.90)
Reasoning ( <i>M, SD</i> )			
Moral	2.04 (1.01)	2.28 (0.89)	1.42 (1.04)
Group functioning	1.10 (1.04)	0.82 (0.95)	1.76 (0.93)

*Note.* The score range for moral judgment ranged from 0 (*very much not OK*) to 3 (*very much OK*), and for reasoning, it ranged from 0 (*agree not at all*) to 3 (*agree very much*). Moral reasoning refers to concerns about fairness and the well-being of the character included (e.g., "It would be unfair and [the character that was included] would be sad if not chosen"). Group functioning refers to negative consequences for the group (e.g., "Because one cannot work well with [the character that was excluded]"). For example, participants who expected the character without learning difficulties to be included, voiced high concerns about effective group functioning if the character with learning difficulties would join the group instead.



**Table 3**  
Results of the generalized linear mixed-effects models predicting the inclusion expectation of the child with learning difficulties.

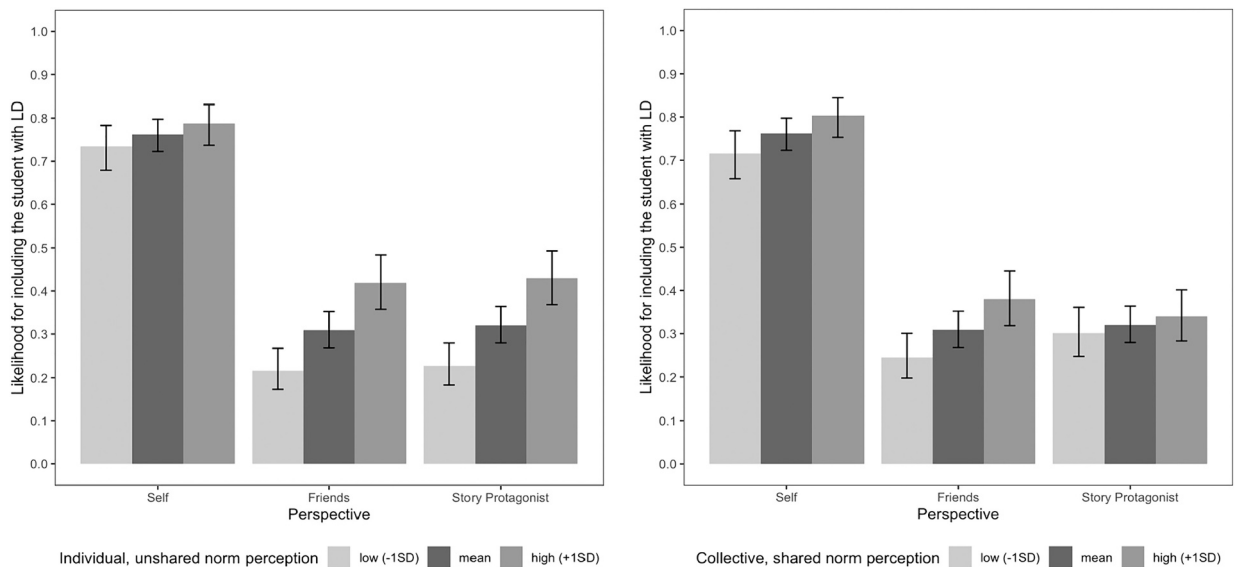
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	Odds Ratios	95% CI	Odds Ratios	95% CI	Odds Ratios	95% CI
Intercept	2.12	[1.56, 2.87] ***	2.17	[1.61, 2.94] ***	2.15	[1.59, 2.92] ***
L1 (repeated measures)						
Perspective [friends]	0.14	[0.10, 0.18] ***	0.14	[0.10, 0.19] ***	0.14	[0.10, 0.19] ***
Perspective [story protagonist]	0.15	[0.11, 0.20] ***	0.15	[0.11, 0.20] ***	0.15	[0.11, 0.20] ***
L2 (child measures)						
Gender	1.78	[1.33, 2.39] ***	1.81	[1.36, 2.42] ***	1.82	[1.36, 2.44] ***
Age	0.98	[0.86, 1.12]	1.00	[0.88, 1.14]	1.00	[0.88, 1.14]
Migration background	1.32	[0.97, 1.81] †	1.24	[0.91, 1.68]	1.24	[0.91, 1.69]
Individual norm perception INP			2.11	[1.56, 2.84] ***	1.35	[0.87, 2.10]
L3 (classroom measures)						
Collective norm perception CNP			2.77	[1.23, 6.22] *	3.17	[1.05, 9.62] *
Cross-level interactions						
Perspective [friends] x INP					1.97	[1.13, 3.44] *
Perspective [protagonist] x INP					1.93	[1.11, 3.34] *
Perspective [friends] x CNP					1.45	[0.41, 5.12]
Perspective [protagonist] x CNP					0.48	[0.14, 1.68]
L2 variance/L3 variance	2.01/0.16		1.86/0.14		1.92/0.15	
$R^2_{GLMM(m)}$	0.15		0.17		0.18	
$R^2_{GLMM(c)}$	0.49		0.49		0.50	
AIC	2761.2		2713.7		2711.0	
BIC	2807.0		2770.9		2791.0	

Note. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; CI = Confidence Interval.  $n = 856$  students in 67 classrooms. Control variables are gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (mean-centered), migration background (0 = no migration background, 1 = migration background). Predictor variables are perspective (self = reference category, friends, story protagonist), individual, unshared norm perception (INP) and collective, shared norm perception (CNP). We report Odds Ratios with their 95% CIs for effect sizes. As an estimator for explained variance we report  $R^2_{GLMM(m)}$  and  $R^2_{GLMM(c)}$ .  $R^2_{GLMM(m)}$  can be interpreted as the proportion of variance explained by the fixed factors alone, whereas  $R^2_{GLMM(c)}$  can be described as the proportion of variance explained by the entire model (both fixed and random factors; Nakagawa et al., 2017).

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Two-tailed.

individual norm perception, as well as the interaction between perspective and collective norm perception.

The findings revealed a significant cross-level interaction between individual norm perception and perspective (see Table 3, Step 3). The interaction effect was examined by systematically changing the reference group of the perspective (for details, see



**Fig. 2.** Children’s inclusion expectations from different perspectives as a function of the inclusive classroom norm.

Note. Predicted probability (based on the binomial generalized mixed-effects model displayed in Table 3) of including the child with learning difficulties (LD) as a function of the perspective (i.e., self, friends, and story protagonist) and the classroom norm. The left figure represents the individual, unshared perception of the classroom norm (class-mean-centered), the right figure represents the collective, shared perception of the classroom norm (grand-mean-centered). The 90% CIs are depicted.

Supplementary Materials 6). The plotted interaction (see Fig. 2) and subsequent simple slopes analyses suggested that the individual norm perception significantly predicted children's inclusion expectations from the perspective of their friends (estimated OR = 2.67, 95% CI [1.72, 4.15],  $p < .001$ ) and the story protagonist (estimated OR = 2.61, 95% CI [1.69, 4.03],  $p < .001$ ), but not from their own perspective (estimated OR = 1.35, 95% CI [0.87, 2.10],  $p = .176$ ). These findings suggest that individuals perceiving a higher inclusive norm (1 scale point above the class average) were approximately 2.6 times more likely to expect that their friends and the story protagonist would include the child with learning difficulties.

Similarly to the results for the individual norm perception, there was a significant cross-level interaction between collective norm perception and perspective. The plotted interaction in Fig. 2 and the corresponding simple slopes analyses (for details, see Supplementary Materials 6) indicated that the collective norm perception significantly predicted children's inclusion expectations from the perspective of self (estimated OR = 3.17, 95% CI [1.05, 9.62],  $p = .041$ ) and their friends (estimated OR = 4.59, 95% CI [1.53, 13.79],  $p = .007$ ), but not from the perspective of the story protagonist (estimated OR = 1.53, 95% CI [0.53, 4.44],  $p = .431$ ). In particular, those children from classrooms with a higher collective norm perception were approximately 3–5 times more likely to expect that they personally and their friends would include the child with learning difficulties compared to children from classrooms with an average collective norm perception. Taken together, these findings provide partial support for H2a, suggesting that inclusive classroom norms predict children's inclusion expectations, although the effects vary depending on the perspective and the measurement of the norm.

### 3.2. Moral judgment

Research Question 1 further investigated how children would judge their expectation of inclusion from the perspective of both their friends and the story protagonist. Consistent with H1b, we found that children evaluated the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties as more OK than the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties, as depicted in the descriptive summary in Table 2. To test whether this difference was statistically significant, we computed an LMM, predicting moral judgment (0 = *extremely not OK* to 3 = *extremely OK*) by inclusion expectation (1 = child with learning difficulties). The results provided support for H1b, revealing that the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties was judged as significantly more acceptable than the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties (see Table 4). The model with inclusion expectation as a predictor explained 21% of the fixed-effects variance (marginal  $R^2$ ) in children's moral judgments, representing an increase compared to the model without inclusion expectation as a predictor, but with control variables only, which explained 1% of the fixed-effects variance.

### 3.3. Reasoning about inclusion

#### 3.3.1. Evaluating moral and group concerns

Research Question 1 further examined children's reasoning about inclusion, specifically focusing on their agreement with moral reasons and reasons related to effective group functioning. Table 2 summarizes the average agreement (0 = *not at all* to 3 = *very much*) with the specific type of reasoning depending on children's own inclusion expectation (1 = child with learning difficulties). The results indicated that children who expected the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties expressed higher agreement with moral

**Table 4**  
Results of the linear mixed-effects model predicting children's moral judgment.

	$\gamma$	95% CI
Intercept	1.39	[1.30, 1.49]***
L1 (repeated measures)		
Inclusion expectation	0.94	[0.85, 1.04]***
L2 (child measures)		
Gender	-0.14	[-0.25, -0.03]*
Age	-0.03	[-0.07, 0.02]
Migration background	0.01	[-0.10, 1.04]
L2 variance	0.29	
$R^2_{\text{GLMM(m)}}$	0.21	
$R^2_{\text{GLMM(c)}}$	0.51	
AIC	3408.4	
BIC	3449.9	

*Note.* AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; CI = Confidence Interval.  $n = 761$  students in 67 classrooms. Control variables include gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (mean-centered), migration background (0 = no migration background, 1 = migration background) and own learning difficulties (0 = no learning difficulties, 1 = learning difficulties). Predictor variables include the inclusion expectations from the perspectives of their friends and the story protagonist (0 = child without learning difficulties, 1 = child with learning difficulties). We report  $\gamma$  with their 95% CIs for effect sizes. As an estimator for explained variance we report  $R^2_{\text{GLMM(m)}}$  and  $R^2_{\text{GLMM(c)}}$ .  $R^2_{\text{GLMM(m)}}$  can be interpreted as the proportion of variance explained by the fixed factors alone whereas  $R^2_{\text{GLMM(c)}}$  can be described as the proportion of variance explained by the entire model (both fixed and random factors; Nakagawa et al., 2017).

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Two-tailed.

concerns compared to those who expected the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties. By contrast, those children expecting the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties demonstrated greater concerns for group functioning.

To analyze the statistical significance of these findings, we computed an LMM, predicting children’s agreement with the specific type of reasoning using a cross-level interaction between type of reasoning (moral, group functioning) and own inclusion expectation (1 = child with learning difficulties). The findings revealed that this interaction was statistically significant (see Table 5, Step 1). The model including the interaction explained 31% of the fixed-effects variance (marginal  $R^2$ ) in children’s agreement, representing an increase compared to the model without the interaction, with predictor and control variables only, which explained 17% of the fixed-effects variance. To probe the interaction, we computed estimated marginal means (EMMs) using the specified LMM (emmeans package; Lenth, 2022) and calculated pairwise comparisons between the EMMs of the factor variables inclusion expectation and type of reasoning. Bonferroni-adjusted group-mean comparisons suggested that children were more likely to agree with moral reasons when including the child with learning difficulties (EMM = 2.30, 95% CI [2.18, 2.41]) than when including the child without learning difficulties (EMM = 1.43, 95% CI [1.26, 1.60],  $t(1375) = 10.86, p < .001$ ), thus supporting H1c. By contrast, children agreed more with concerns about group functioning when including the child without learning difficulties (EMM = 1.77, 95% CI [1.63, 1.90]) than when including the child with learning difficulties (EMM = 0.82, 95% CI [0.73, 0.92],  $t(1376) = 11.81, p < .001$ ), thereby supporting H1d.

3.3.2. Perceived inclusive classroom norms and reasoning about inclusion

Regarding Research Question 2, we investigated whether inclusive classroom norms predicted children’s agreement with moral reasons (H2b) and reasons about effective group functioning (H2c). To address this, we introduced children’s individual and collective norm perception to the LMM. Additionally, we included two specific cross-level interactions, one between type of reasoning and individual norm perception, and the other between type of reasoning and collective norm perception.

The results showed a significant interaction between individual norm perception and type of reasoning (see Table 5, Step 2). To better understand this interaction effect, the reference groups for reasoning were systematically altered (see Supplementary Materials 6). The interaction (see Fig. 3) and simple slopes analysis suggested that children perceiving a higher inclusive norm (one scale point above the class average) were less likely to agree with reasons about effective group functioning ( $\gamma = -0.19, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.33, -0.04], p = .011$ ). However, we did not find a significant effect of individual norm perception on children’s agreement with moral reasons ( $\gamma = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.12, 0.16], p = .801$ ). Regarding collective norm perception, there was no significant interaction with type of reasoning (Table 5, Step 2). Those children from classrooms with a relatively higher collective norm perception were as likely to agree with both moral and group functioning reasons as children from classrooms with an average collective norm perception (see Fig. 3).

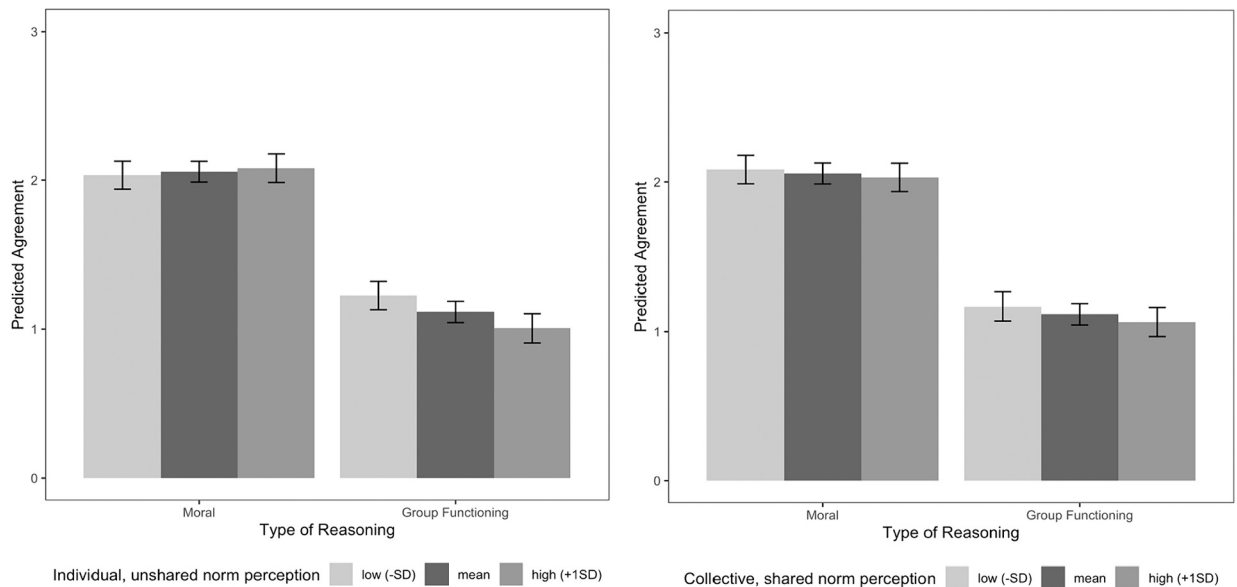
In summary, these findings do not provide statistical evidence to support H2b, as neither individual perception nor the collective norm perception significantly predicted children’s agreement with moral reasons. However, H2c was partially supported, indicating

**Table 5**  
Results of the linear mixed-effects models predicting children’s agreement with moral and group functioning reasons.

	Step 1		Step 2	
	$\gamma$	95% CI	$\gamma$	95% CI
Intercept	1.43	[1.28, 1.58]***	1.43	[1.29, 1.58]***
L1 (repeated measures)				
Reasoning [group functioning]	0.33	[0.15, 0.51]***	0.33	[0.15, 0.51]***
L2 (child measures)				
Gender	0.00	[-0.11, 0.09]	-0.02	[-0.12, 0.08]
Age	0.02	[-0.02, 0.07]	0.02	[-0.02, 0.06]
Migration background	0.01	[-0.09, 0.12]	0.00	[-0.10, 0.12]
Own inclusion expectation	0.86	[0.71, 1.02]***	0.87	[0.71, 1.02]***
Individual norm perception INP			0.02	[-0.12, 0.16]
L3 (classroom measures)				
Collective norm perception CNP			-0.26	[-0.62, 0.09]
Cross-level interactions				
Reasoning [group functioning] x Inclusion expectation [with LD]	-1.80	[-2.02, -1.59] ***	-1.80	[-2.02, -1.59]***
Reasoning [group functioning] x INP			-0.21	[-0.41, -0.01]*
Reasoning [group functioning] x CNP			0.16	[-0.29, 0.62]
L2 variance / L3 variance	0.02/0.01		0.02/0.01	
$R^2_{GLMM(m)}$	0.31		0.31	
$R^2_{GLMM(c)}$	0.33		0.34	
AIC	3768.4		3737.1	
BIC	3820.6		3810.1	

Note. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; CI = Confidence Interval.  $n = 714$  students in 67 classrooms. Control variables included gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (mean-centered), and migration background (0 = no migration background, 1 = migration background). Predictor variables included inclusion expectation from perspective of self (0 = child without learning difficulties, 1 = child with learning difficulties), reasoning (0 = moral, 1 = group functioning), individual, unshared perception of the norm (INP) and collective, shared perception of the norm (CNP). We report  $\gamma$  with their 95% confidence intervals for effect sizes. As an estimator for explained variance we report  $R^2_{GLMM(m)}$  and  $R^2_{GLMM(c)}$ . Although marginal  $R^2_{GLMM(m)}$  can be interpreted as the proportion of variance explained by the fixed factors alone,  $R^2_{GLMM(c)}$  can be described as the proportion of variance explained by the entire model (both fixed and random factors; Nakagawa et al., 2017).

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Two-tailed.



**Fig. 3.** Children's agreement with moral and group functioning reasons as a function of the inclusive classroom norm.

*Note.* Predicted agreement (based on the linear mixed-effects model displayed in Table 5) with moral reasons and reasons about group functioning as a function of the perceived classroom norm. The left figure represents the individual, unshared perception of the classroom norm (class-mean-centered), the right figure represents the collective, shared perception of the classroom norm (grand-mean-centered). The 90% CIs are depicted. To ensure the plot remains intuitively understandable, we represent the interaction of norms on reasoning without controlling for the interaction between reasoning and the inclusion of children with learning difficulties.

that children who perceived a higher inclusive norm than their classroom average were less likely to voice concerns about effective group functioning, although there was no statistically significant effect of the collective norm perception on children's agreement with group functioning statements.

#### 4. Discussion

Our study revealed novel findings about the role of classroom norms in Swiss elementary school children's expectations and reasoning about the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties in an academic context. The first contribution of this work was providing new evidence regarding the role of inclusive classroom norms for children's inclusion expectations. Accordingly, our results confirmed our hypothesis that a higher inclusive perception of the norm was associated with a greater inclusion of children with learning difficulties. Thus, those children in classrooms with a relatively higher collective norm perception were approximately four times more likely to expect that they personally would include the child with learning difficulties in a difficult math task than children in classrooms with a relatively lower norm perception. This finding expands existing peer socialization research (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Veenstra & Lodder, 2022) by demonstrating the potential for leveraging inclusive classroom norms to foster individuals' openness to including peers with learning difficulties in academic contexts. Future longitudinal work on this topic could investigate the mechanisms by which inclusive classroom norms shape children's expectations. For example, children may adjust their attitudes and behaviors to increase their chances of gaining social status or to decrease the risk of social punishment by their peers if they were to deviate from the classroom norm (Veenstra & Lodder, 2022). Thus, it would be important to highlight the role of inclusive classroom norms as part of the social dynamics of the classroom.

The second contribution of this work relates to children's social perception. The results provided support for our hypothesis that inclusive classroom norms were associated with children's expectations about inclusion in their social world. Extending previous work on classroom norms (Gasser et al., 2017, 2018), those children in classrooms with a relatively higher collective norm perception were approximately three times more likely to expect that their friends would include the child with learning difficulties compared to children in classrooms with a relatively lower collective norm perception. Hence, consistent with social sampling theory (Galesic et al., 2018; Schulze et al., 2021), children may recall their classmates as an important reference group when making predictions about other social groups, such as their friends. However, our findings revealed no statistically significant relation between children's collective norm perception and their expectations regarding the story protagonist. This suggests that children did not just project their classroom experiences onto their expectations about inclusion in society. To explain this finding, further research could explore whether other social contexts, such as the family (Grütter et al., 2021) or schools (Grütter, Dhakal, & Killen, 2022), might constitute more significant reference groups for children's expectations about inclusion in society.

The third contribution of this work concerned children's perception of themselves in relation to their social world. Thus, in addition to understanding children's beliefs about what other social referents would do, we were interested in how children evaluated

themselves in comparison to their social world. Our findings confirmed our hypothesis that children evaluated themselves in a more positive light than others, contradicting prior research on social projection (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016) by demonstrating that children did not generalize their own inclusive intentions to others. They expected more inclusion of the child with learning difficulties from themselves than from their friends or from the story protagonist. This finding might be explained by the *better than average* effect (Brown, 2012) that states that children tend to evaluate themselves in a more positive light than they evaluate others (Levy et al., 2021). However, an alternative explanation for this self-other discrepancy might be that children's high inclusive intentions are interpreted as a "desire" for more inclusion. Accordingly, children might perceive low rates of inclusion in their social environment, whereas personally they would like to be more inclusive. This explanation is supported by research within the SRD framework (Chilver-Stainer et al., 2014; Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013) that has highlighted children's moral sensitivity toward disability-based exclusion.

This moral sensitivity was also reflected in children's judgment and reasoning about their inclusion expectations. As predicted, they judged the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties as more acceptable compared to the inclusion of the child without learning difficulties, hence rejecting exclusion based on group membership (Chilver-Stainer et al., 2014; Gasser et al., 2013, 2014; Sims et al., 2022). This moral sensitivity was also represented in children's reasoning. As predicted, most children voiced high moral concerns about the well-being of the child with learning difficulties. By contrast, we found that children who did not expect the inclusion of the child with learning difficulties also mentioned higher concerns that the inclusion would threaten successful group functioning. This finding corroborates prior work by demonstrating that children may give priority to group concerns over moral concerns when making inclusion predictions in academic situations (Gasser et al., 2013, 2014, 2017; Nowicki et al., 2014; Rutland et al., 2022). Similarly, children may pay less attention to their moral orientation toward the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties when they perceive threats to their group and expect that other group members could disapprove of the inclusion (Miller & McFarland, 1991).

The fourth contribution of the present study concerned new insights regarding the role of classroom norms for children's reasoning about inclusion. In aiming to expand the very little prior work on this topic (e.g., Gasser et al., 2017), we hypothesized that children would be more concerned about moral reasons and less concerned about effective group functioning when they perceived high inclusive classroom norms. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found no statistical support to indicate that children's shared or unshared perception of inclusive classroom norms was related to an increased focus on moral concerns. A potential explanation for this finding might be that, in our present study, children's moral orientation toward inclusion was already very high. Specific to our hypothesis that higher inclusive norms would be linked to decreased concerns about group functioning, the results indicated no significant effect of the collective norm perception, but a significant effect of the individual norm perception. Thus, those children perceiving a relatively higher inclusive norm, compared to those perceiving a relatively lower inclusive norm, voiced fewer concerns regarding effective group functioning. This finding adds novel insight into the SRD model (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Rutland & Killen, 2015) by demonstrating that children's individual differences in norm perception may guide their reasoning about inclusion.

The finding that children who perceived a higher inclusive norm were more likely to expect inclusion from both their friends and the story protagonist also suggests that children may have a general tendency to evaluate their social environment in a generally positive light (Dillon & Lochman, 2022). This tendency to generally have an optimistic view of their social world might also explain why children had similar beliefs about their friends' and the story protagonist's inclusiveness. Future research is warranted to disentangle such potential individual perceptual tendencies from children's reasoning in intergroup situations.

#### 4.1. Limitations and future directions

Some limitations of the study should be noted when interpreting the results. First, the ICC2 value for the collective classroom norm was moderate, but not high ( $ICC2 = 0.59$ ), suggesting that children's perceptions of the classroom had a strong individual component. However, despite this relatively modest ICC2 we aggregated children's individual norm perceptions at the classroom level, considering that similar ICC2s have been reported from studies with comparable classroom norm aggregates (e.g., Gasser et al., 2018). Furthermore, because we were particularly interested in examining this individual component, we included children's individual, unshared norm perceptions in our statistical models, thus controlling for any potential misinterpretations of the shared norm aggregate (Marsh et al., 2012). Second, it is important to consider that children's perceptions of their own and their classmates' inclusive behaviors may not necessarily reflect actual rates of inclusive behaviors in the classroom. To investigate the degree to which children's inclusion expectations align with their inclusive behavior, future work should assess actual rates of inclusion in the classroom through observations or social network data. Third, we only had cross-sectional data available to analyze whether the classroom constituted an important reference group for children's beliefs about their friends and society. Thus, the data do not allow for causal conclusions about the direction of the effects because it is possible that children not only generalize their classroom experiences to their friends but also, conversely, recall their friends when making predictions about their classmates. Future studies using longitudinal designs or social network approaches could investigate children's perceptions of their classroom and other social groups from a bidirectional viewpoint.

#### 4.2. Implications

The findings of our study have significant implications for school psychologists advising teachers and families on how to promote the inclusion of children with learning difficulties. Specifically, they can advise teachers to heighten children's perceptions of inclusive classroom norms by encouraging them to share positive personal experiences of cross-group friendships or successful academic group work involving children with and without learning difficulties (e.g., Grütter et al., 2018; Vezzali et al., 2015). Highlighting the



personal experiences of the most influential and popular children in the classroom can be especially effective in setting inclusive norms at the classroom level (Prentice & Paluck, 2020). In addition, school psychologists could develop targeted interventions to enhance the inclusion of children with learning difficulties in academic settings. These interventions could focus on creating inclusive learning environments through classroom discussions that raise children's awareness of when and why they might prioritize moral concerns over group concerns (Grütter, Tschopp, et al., 2022; Killen et al., 2022; Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2021). The results of this study provide novel insights that suggest such discussions should not only include children's group concerns, but also their expectations about inclusion in their social world. Furthermore, increasing children's accuracy in estimating their classmates' inclusiveness may also be effective in weakening their concerns that inclusion could threaten effective group functioning (Dillon & Lochman, 2022). Finally, more educational research is warranted to determine the potential of social norm interventions in targeting both individual- and group-level processes to foster the inclusion of children with learning difficulties.

## 5. Conclusion

This study contributes new empirical evidence regarding children's expectations and reasoning about the inclusion of peers with learning difficulties in their social world. Overall, our findings suggest that targeting inclusive classroom norms may be relevant in increasing children's own inclusive intentions and their beliefs about inclusion within their social world. Given the long-term negative consequences of social exclusion, further research is warranted to better understand the interplay between children's socio-moral reasoning, classroom norms, and their social perception to design interventions that enable the social participation of children with learning difficulties in inclusive classrooms.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary materials for this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2024.101312>.

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