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Role of comparative ability in shaping children's perceptions of "us" versus "them" in early childhood development

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Background: According to Piaget, early childhood is a critical period for cognitive and social development, during which children begin to distinguish people based on visible social differences, language exposure, and adult influences. Social identity theory describes how individuals define themselves within social groups, by creating "us vs them" mentality. This study explores the influence of cultural, ethnic, and religious comparisons in early childhood on the development of social divisions, drawing on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory.

Method: The research was conducted at the MECDC Centre, University of Kelaniya, with a sample of 21 children aged 3 - 7 years. It was mixed-methods research combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches including observation, group work, interviews, educational interventions, and content analysis.

Results: Although the ability to compare is an innate cognitive skill, findings suggest that periconceptual children do not instinctively categorize people based on race, nationality, religion, language, or gender. When children grow up, their perceptions are increasingly shaped by their environment. When differences are introduced negatively, children develop "us vs them" mindset, reinforcing in-group bias. Segregated groups tend to exhibit stronger prejudices, and children who are exposed to various environments from an early age show greater acceptance and resilience against stereotypes.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social comparison is not innate but fostered by external influences. To reduce social divisions and foster inclusion, the study recommends adopting an "us versus us" mindset that values cooperation over competitive comparisons. Educational approaches should emphasize authentic cultural diversity over abstract representations. Educators and parents are urged to identify and address implicit biases to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Promoting positivity about differences through storytelling, role-playing, multicultural activities, and facilitating social interactions between children from diverse backgrounds can foster acceptance and unity from an early age.

Keywords: Early childhood development, social identity theory, cognitive development.