

# How Do Children Make Sense of the Differences They See Among Students at School?

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Today, during circle time in preschool, the teacher is reading a new book called *The Three Robbers*. The teacher begins reading the book: “Once upon a time there were three robbers, with big black coats and high black hats.” When the teacher shows the picture to the children, Jeanne says to the classroom: “They are scary! But actually, they are nice!” The other children wonder how Jeanne knows this!

This example illustrates the fact that classroom settings bring to light many differences among children. These differences might pertain to academic achievement, to the speed and ease with which children perform various tasks, to how they speak, or to other behaviors and characteristics. In a recent project, my colleague, Andrei Cimpian, and I examined the question of how children explain the differences they observe in the classroom and what the consequences of their explanations are.

Research shows that children’s explanations for differences among students tend to focus on the personal characteristics of the children. That is, children explain why other students perform differently in terms of inherent or intrinsic factors—such as differences in intelligence and motivation—rather than in terms of extrinsic or situational explanations such as students’ social background or family situation. This inherence bias in children’s explanations is probably due to a combination of things. For example, compared to extrinsic properties such as family background, inherent properties are more obvious and observable—they come to mind more easily, and they are simpler to think about.

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