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Students' Adaptation, Classroom Participation, Group Work, and Peer Relations in University Classrooms: A Descriptive Survey for Learning Environment Policy

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ABSTRACT

Adapting to university requires students to adjust to lecturers, classmates, group assignments, and classroom conditions, and adjustment is more successful where students feel safe to participate and speak. Drawing on research on academic adjustment, classroom climate, psychological safety, and cooperative learning, this study describes how university students perceive their adaptation, expression of opinions, classroom climate and lecturer interaction, group work, peer relations, and personal development, and it identifies which perceptions are strongest and weakest to inform learning environment policy. A cross-sectional descriptive survey was conducted with 59 students who rated twenty statements on a five-point agreement scale. The data were analyzed descriptively with means, standard deviations, percentage distributions, confidence intervals, and item rankings, supported by reliability and item-total checks and by a sensitivity check that excluded duplicated response patterns. Perceptions were generally favorable, with an overall mean of 4.01 and 79 percent of responses at agree or strongly agree. Adaptation, personal development, and group work were rated highest, each at about 4.11, whereas expressing opinions and psychological safety were rated lowest at 3.68, and only 46 percent of students agreed that they were not afraid to voice opinions that differ from those of friends. The highest-rated statements concerned lecturers giving opportunities to participate and lectures that train cooperation. The study is novel in showing, within one descriptive profile, that students adapt and cooperate well while remaining least secure in voicing differing views. The findings are indicative because the sample is small, and the responses are self-reported.

INTRODUCTION

Adapting to the academic environment is a central task of university study. It is a multidimensional process that spans academic, social, and psychological adjustment, and students' first experiences of lecturers, classmates, and classroom routines shape how well they settle in (Corti et al., 2023; Lajuma et al., 2026; Chemagosi & Ajayi, 2023). Recent evidence shows that adjustment is influenced by personal resources such as coping and resilience (Marenco-Escuderos et al., 2023), by how students perceive their learning environment (Karimi Mirzanezam et al., 2024), and by the challenges, support, and adaptation processes they meet in the first year (Wahid et al., 2025). The ideal condition is a classroom in which students adapt smoothly, take part actively, receive real opportunities from their lecturers, cooperate fairly with classmates, and gain confidence as a result.

Participation, in turn, depends on the classroom climate and on lecturers. Recent studies report that positive teacher–student interaction increases classroom participation and

students' verbal initiative (Yang et al., 2026; Jiang et al., 2026; Munir et al., 2026; Doan et al., 2025), that early meetings between students and instructors reduce anonymity and promote engagement (Davis et al., 2025), and that approachable lecturers reduce students' fear of taking part (Xu & Zhang, 2025). Psychological safety, the belief that one can take interpersonal risks without negative consequences, is associated with willingness to communicate, engagement, and teamwork in the classroom (Hu et al., 2026; Gonda et al., 2024; Elliott et al., 2026; Fisher & Rosikiewicz, 2026), and classroom practices oriented to belonging are linked to a psychologically safe climate and engagement (Töre, 2026). Group work is a further arena of adaptation: cooperative learning builds trust and positive attitudes toward group work, and its effectiveness depends on communication, task structure, feedback, and support (Beattie & Ersoy, 2025; Garcia & Privado, 2023).

Yet students do not always speak up. Anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and complex motivations make students hesitant to participate verbally (Banani, 2025; Severe et al., 2024), and power dynamics between lecturers and students can constrain participation (Syahriani et al., 2024). The objective problem is therefore a gap between the ideal of an open and safe classroom and the possibility that students adapt and cooperate well while remaining reluctant to voice dissenting views. Whether this gap exists among ordinary undergraduates is not clear from the literature, because these themes have been studied separately.

Previous studies have examined adjustment among first-year students, medical and nursing students, and first-generation students (Wahid et al., 2025; Karimi Mirzanezam et al., 2024; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2021; Valenti & Faraci, 2021); participation and lecturer interaction in particular courses and countries (Yang & Connie Cassy Ompok, 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2024; Hazzam & Wilkins, 2023); open classroom climate (Rapa et al., 2022; Myoung & Liou, 2025); and psychological safety in graduate, online, or clinical courses (Elliott et al., 2026; Fisher & Rosikiewicz, 2026; Nyarko Mensah et al., 2026). These studies are valuable, but they leave an aspect underexplored. Few place adaptation, willingness to express opinions, lecturer interaction, group work, and peer relations in one descriptive profile from the perspective of undergraduates, so it is difficult to see where students are strong and where they are hesitant, and policy discussions tend to treat participation as a single quality rather than as several. The present study differs from and extends earlier work by measuring all six aspects with one instrument and reporting them side by side, with particular attention to the statements on which students are least certain.

Two theories guide the study. Psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999) holds that people learn and contribute when they believe they will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up, which leads us to treat willingness to express differing opinions as a distinct indicator of the classroom climate. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) holds that learning is mediated by interaction with lecturers and peers, which justifies examining lecturer interaction, group work, and peer relations together. The novelty of the study is a single descriptive profile that shows whether students' strong adaptation and cooperation coexist with weaker confidence in voicing opinions. The research is relevant to learning environment policy, because decisions on class organization, group assignments, lecturer development, and teaching quality need evidence on where students feel secure and where they do not.

Accordingly, this study aims to describe university students' perceptions of adaptation to the academic environment, expression of opinions and psychological safety, classroom climate and lecturer interaction, group work and cooperation, peer relations and inclusion, and personal development, and to identify the statements that students endorse most and least strongly. Because the design is descriptive, no hypothesis is tested.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive survey. The design suits the research objectives because it describes students' perceptions at one point in time rather than

testing explanatory models. The population comprised 110 students of the 2024 cohort of the Office Administration Education Study Program, Department of Administrative Science, Universitas Negeri Makassar. The inclusion criteria were active student status and enrollment in the fifth semester. Participants were selected through random sampling, which gave a sample of 59 students, or 53.6% of the population. Data were collected in September 2026 [state the mode of administration, such as an online form or a printed questionnaire]. Participation was voluntary, and we kept respondents' identities confidential; we did not use names in the analysis and did not report them.

The instrument was a questionnaire of 20 first-person statements answered on a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) [source of the instrument to be stated if it was adopted or adapted]. According to their content and the literature reviewed above, the statements were grouped into six dimensions: adaptation to the academic environment (statements 1 and 2), expressing opinions and psychological safety (3, 4, and 13), classroom climate and lecturer interaction (5, 6, 7, 16, and 20), group work and cooperation (8, 9, 10, and 14), peer relations and inclusion (11, 12, and 15), and personal development outcomes (17, 18, and 19). All statements are worded positively, so higher scores indicate stronger agreement with a favorable statement. The statements are shown in abbreviated form in Figure 2.

Instrument quality was checked with corrected item–total correlations and Cronbach's alpha. Eighteen of the 20 statements exceeded the critical correlation of .256 ($n = 59$, $\alpha = .05$), with values from .28 to .69; statement 6 ($r = .22$) and statement 9 ($r = .09$) fell below it, and both had near-ceiling agreement (93%) and little variance. All statements were retained because the aim was to describe each perception. Cronbach's alpha for the full scale was .86, and it was unchanged when the two statements were excluded.

Data were analyzed descriptively. For each statement, the mean, standard deviation, and the percentages of agree or strongly agree (4–5), neutral (3), and disagree or strongly disagree (1–2) were computed. Dimension scores were the means of their statements, reported with 95% confidence intervals and interpreted with the conventional five-class intervals (3.41–4.20 high, 4.21–5.00 very high). Statements were ranked by their means. A sensitivity check repeated the analysis after excluding exact duplicate response patterns. No inferential tests were applied, so differences among statements and dimensions are descriptive. Analyses were run in Python 3 (pandas and SciPy), and figures were produced with Matplotlib.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overall Pattern and Dimension Results

Perceptions were favorable overall. The mean across all statements was 4.01, and of 1,180 responses, 79.2% were agree or strongly agree, 19.9% were neutral, and 0.9% were disagree or strongly disagree (1 response of strongly disagree). Of 59 students, 58 had an overall mean in the high or very high range and 16 in the very high range. Table 1 and Figure 1 show that all six dimensions were in the high range. Adaptation to the academic environment ($M = 4.12$), personal development outcomes ($M = 4.12$), and group work and cooperation ($M = 4.11$) had the highest means, followed by classroom climate and lecturer interaction ($M = 4.07$) and peer relations and inclusion ($M = 3.94$). Expressing opinions and psychological safety had the lowest mean ($M = 3.68$), and only 58% of its responses were agree or strongly agree, compared with 75% to 89% for the other dimensions.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Six Dimensions (n = 59)

Dimension	Items	M	SD	95% CI	Category	Agree (%)
Adaptation to the academic environment	2	4.12	0.49	[3.99, 4.25]	High	87%

Dimension	Items	M	SD	95% CI	Category	Agree (%)
Expressing opinions and psychological safety	3	3.68	0.59	[3.53, 3.84]	High	58%
Classroom climate and lecturer interaction	5	4.07	0.43	[3.96, 4.18]	High	81%
Group work and cooperation	4	4.11	0.41	[4.01, 4.22]	High	89%
Peer relations and inclusion	3	3.94	0.45	[3.83, 4.06]	High	75%
Personal development outcomes	3	4.12	0.50	[3.99, 4.25]	High	84%

Source: authors' survey data, 2026

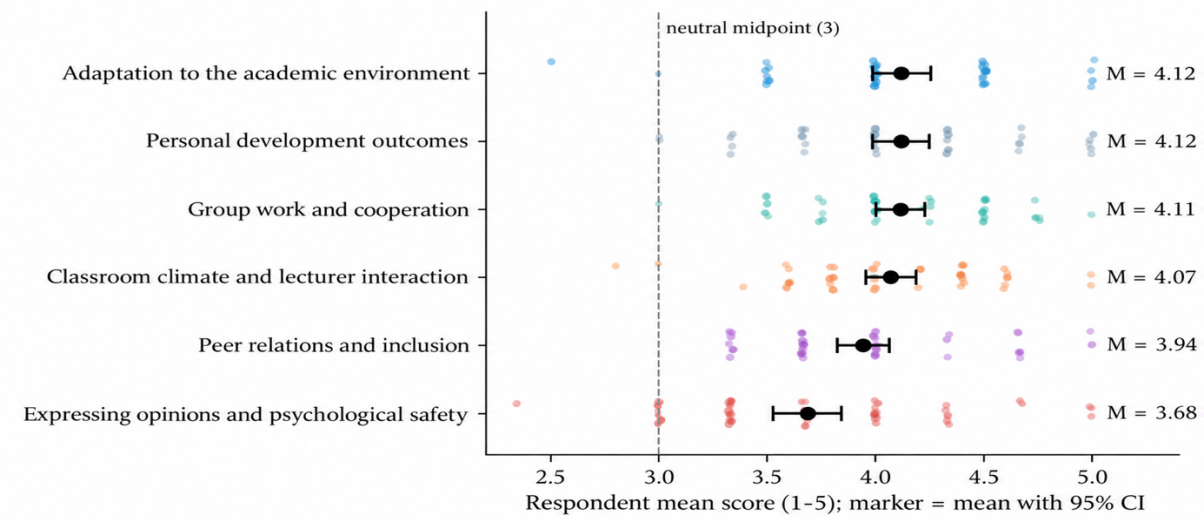


Figure 1. Dimension scores of respondents.
Source: authors' survey data, 2026

Statement-Level Results

At the statement level (Table 2; Figures 2 and 3), the highest means were for lecturers giving enough chances to participate (M = 4.27; 93% agreed), lectures that also train cooperation (M = 4.24; 95%), being able to adapt to the lecture environment (M = 4.19; 93%), classroom conditions that support comfort (M = 4.19; 88%), and understanding the division of tasks in group work (M = 4.15; 93%). The lowest means were for not being afraid to voice opinions that differ from friends' (M = 3.56; 46% agreed, 47% neutral, 7% disagreed), feeling comfortable expressing opinions in class (M = 3.61; 53% agreed, 46% neutral), communicating well with new classmates (M = 3.80; 36% neutral), the class staying conducive despite differing opinions (M = 3.88), and good lecturer–student communication (M = 3.93). Disagreement was rare: no statement exceeded 7% disagree or strongly disagree, and the lowest statements were marked chiefly by neutral answers.

Table 2. Highest- and Lowest-Ranked Statements (n = 59)

Rank	Statement	M	SD	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)
1	Lecturer gives enough chances to participate	4.27	0.64	93	5

Rank	Statement	M	SD	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)
2	Lectures also train cooperation	4.24	0.54	95	5
3	Able to adapt to the lecture environment	4.19	0.60	93	5
4	Classroom conditions support comfort	4.19	0.63	88	12
5	Understand task division in group work	4.15	0.58	93	5
16	Lecturer–student communication is good	3.93	0.72	75	24
17	Class stays conducive despite differing opinions	3.88	0.62	75	25
18	Can communicate well with new classmates	3.80	0.76	63	36
19	Comfortable expressing opinions in class	3.61	0.70	53	46
20	Not afraid to voice opinions differing from friends	3.56	0.86	46	47

Source: authors' survey data, 2026

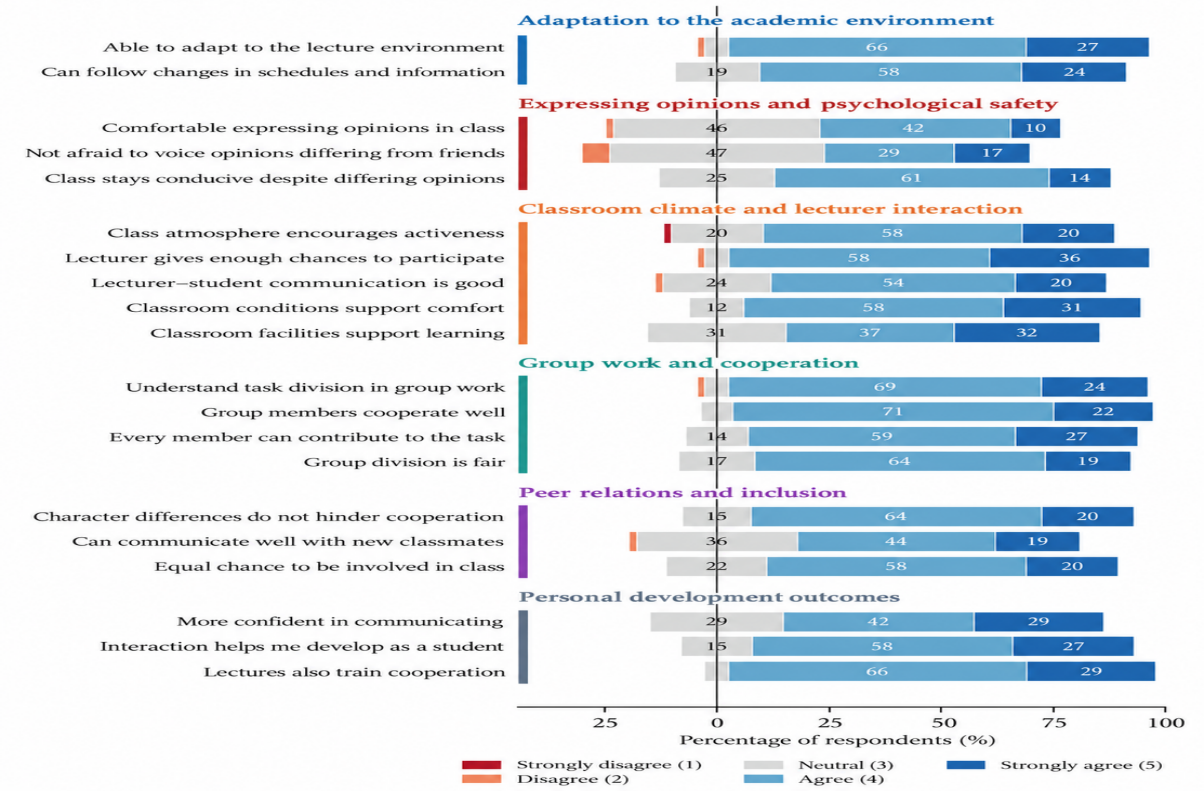


Figure 2. Distribution of responses by statement
Source: authors' survey data, 2026

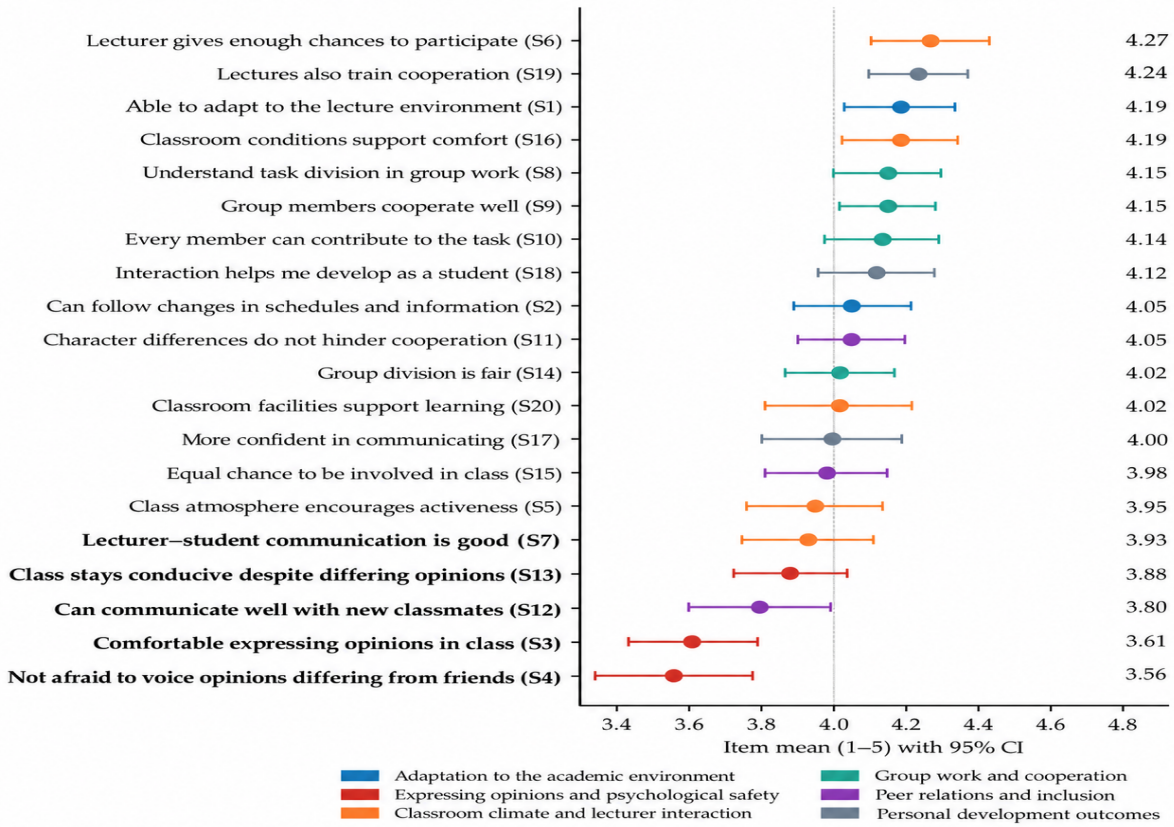


Figure 3. *Statements ranked by mean*
Source: authors' survey data, 2026

After excluding 4 duplicated response patterns (n = 55), the overall mean was 4.00, the dimension means ranged from 3.68 (expressing opinions and psychological safety) to 4.11 (group work and cooperation), and the same statements ranked highest (S6, S19, S1) and lowest (S4, S3, S12) as in the full sample.

Interpretation of the Main Findings

Students perceived their adaptation, cooperation, and development as favorable, but they were least secure about speaking up. The lowest dimension and the two lowest statements all concern expressing opinions, especially opinions that differ from those of friends, and these statements were marked mostly by neutral rather than negative answers (47% and 46%). The pattern suggests uncertainty and caution rather than rejection. From the perspective of psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999), speaking up carries interpersonal risk, and students may be unsure whether differing views will be received without embarrassment; this agrees with reports that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation make students hesitant to participate verbally (Banani, 2025; Severe et al., 2024). The contrast with the highest-rated statement is instructive: students agreed strongly that lecturers give them chances to participate (M = 4.27), yet they were less sure about voicing differing views to friends (M = 3.56). This indicates that opportunities provided by lecturers and the willingness to take the interpersonal risk of dissent are different things, and that the second depends on peer relations as much as on lecturers. Communicating with new classmates also drew many neutral answers (36%), which is consistent with a peer-related source of hesitation.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The high ratings for adaptation and personal development agree with the view of adjustment as a multidimensional process that can proceed well when academic, social, and

psychological demands are met (Corti et al., 2023; Lajuma et al., 2026). The strong agreement on lecturers' opportunities and on communication supports evidence that teacher–student interaction and approachable lecturers promote participation (Yang et al., 2026; Jiang et al., 2026; Doan et al., 2025; Xu & Zhang, 2025). The favorable ratings of group work, including understanding of task division (M = 4.15) and cooperation (M = 4.15), are in line with findings that cooperative learning builds trust and positive attitudes toward group work (Beattie & Ersoy, 2025). The weaker ratings for expressing opinions extend research that links psychological safety to willingness to communicate and engagement (Hu et al., 2026; Gonda et al., 2024; Nyarko Mensah et al., 2026) by showing that, within the same students, high adaptation and cooperation can coexist with lower confidence in voicing views. They also fit reports that power dynamics and complex motivations shape verbal participation (Syahriani et al., 2024; Severe et al., 2024).

The findings provide a descriptive profile of students' perceptions of the academic learning environment, highlighting a distinction between academic adaptation and the willingness to express differing opinions. Students reported favorable experiences regarding adaptation, cooperation, and lecturer–student interaction, while expressing comparatively greater uncertainty about speaking up and voicing disagreement. This pattern contributes to understanding classroom climate by showing that positive academic adjustment and cooperative relationships do not necessarily indicate that students feel equally comfortable expressing divergent views. Consistent with psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999) and the sociocultural perspective on learning (Vygotsky, 1978), the findings suggest that both interpersonal relationships and opportunities for open expression deserve attention in evaluating the quality of the learning environment.

Practically, lecturers can strengthen classroom participation by implementing structured discussions, maintaining approachable communication, providing individual support to students (Davis et al., 2025), and fostering inclusive interactions (Xu & Zhang, 2025). Universities may also incorporate psychological safety and opportunities to express disagreement into learning environment assessments and lecturer development programs. Given the favorable perceptions of classroom facilities and physical conditions, greater attention may be warranted toward interaction practices and the social dynamics of learning. However, two highly endorsed items—opportunities to participate (S6) and group cooperation (S9)—showed weak item–total correlations, possibly because responses were concentrated at the positive end of the scale. The substantial proportion of neutral responses to statements about speaking up also warrants further investigation, as it may reflect either genuine ambivalence or reluctance to express opinions.

These findings should be interpreted cautiously because the sample is small, respondent characteristics and sampling procedures are insufficiently described, and the data rely on positively worded self-reports. The content-based grouping of items, the limited number of statements within some dimensions, and the descriptive cross-sectional design also constrain the conclusions that can be drawn. Future research should employ more diverse samples, incorporate behavioral observations and differently worded items, and use inferential analyses to examine the relationships among lecturer interaction, psychological safety, and student participation. Qualitative interviews could further clarify why students remain uncertain about expressing differing opinions and identify strategies for developing more inclusive and psychologically safe learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study described how 59 university students perceive their adaptation to the academic environment, expression of opinions, classroom climate and lecturer interaction, group work, peer relations, and personal development. Perceptions were favorable overall, with adaptation, personal development, and group work rated highest, whereas expressing

opinions and psychological safety were rated lowest, chiefly through neutral rather than negative answers. The study contributes a single descriptive profile showing that students can adapt and cooperate well while remaining least secure about voicing differing views, which indicates that opportunities to participate and the safety to dissent are distinct aspects of the learning environment. For lecturers and institutions, this implies attending to interaction routines that lower the risk of speaking up, to group composition that widens peer contact, and to learning environment policies that treat psychological safety as an indicator of quality. The main limitation is the small, self-reported sample with positively worded statements, which limits generalization. Future research should test these patterns with larger samples, respondent characteristics, and behavioral or qualitative evidence on participation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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