ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Prosocial Behaviour and Schooling

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviour in the form of sharing, helping, and cooperating is a hallmark of social competence throughout childhood.[1,2] Of direct relevance for schooling is that prosocial behaviour has been related positively to intellectual outcomes, including classroom grades and standardized test scores.[3] Displays of prosocial behaviour also have been related positively to other socially competent outcomes, including social acceptance and approval among classmates and being liked by teachers. Most scholars assume that cognitive and affective skills such as perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning, adaptive attributional styles, perceived competence, and emotional well-being provide a psychological foundation for the development of prosocial behaviour. Individual differences such as genetic and temperament characteristics also have been noted.[1,2] In addition, theoretical perspectives also propose environmental influences, to include parenting within authoritative structures and positive interactions with peers.[4] Social developmental perspectives suggest that parents who encourage perspective taking and evoke empathic responses to the distress of others are likely to promote the internalization of prosocial values in their children.5 In addition, proponents of a peer socialization perspective typically

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argue that peer relationships provide opportunities for children to learn and practice prosocial skills. Collaborative interactions with peers also are believed to motivate the development of cognitive skills that support prosocial forms of behaviour.[2,6]

Subject

Understanding prosocial behaviour within school contexts is important for two reasons. First, schools provide children with ongoing opportunities to develop prosocial skills by way of interactions with peers. These opportunities can be informal, taking place within the context of friendships, peer group interactions, and play. They can also occur within the context of formal instruction, such as cooperative and collaborative learning activities.[4,7] Positive relationships and interactions with teachers can also result in students learning and adopting positive values for prosocial behaviour in the classroom. Second, prosocial behaviour appears to support the development of academic skills.[3,4] This might occur because positive classroom behaviour is likely to result in positive interactions with teachers and peers, including provisions of academic help and positive feedback. It also is possible that underlying competencies that support prosocial behaviour, such as perspective taking and emotion regulation, also support the development of cognitive abilities.

Problems

It is clear that prosocial behaviour is highly valued by teachers and school personnel, as well as by children themselves. In addition, prosocial behaviour has received recent, increased attention by educators due, in part, to interest in promoting positive aspects of psychological functioning and adjustment rather than treating maladaptive forms of classroom behaviour once they occur. Instructional programs and interventions that directly promote the development of prosocial behaviour have had some success.[8] However, they are often difficult to implement, especially given other academic and disciplinary issues that also need to be addressed on a daily basis.

Research Context

The vast majority of studies on prosocial behaviour have been conducted on children in elementary school and middle school, although research on preschool children is becoming more frequent. This research relies primarily on teacher and peer reports of classroom behaviour or systematic classroom observations. The underlying psychological processes hypothesized to support prosocial behaviour in preschool-aged children are often assessed using structured

laboratory-type tasks, whereas self-report methodologies are frequently used with older children.

Key Research Questions

Current research on prosocial behaviour in young children focuses on the following questions: 1) What are the underlying psychological processes and socialization mechanisms that promote prosocial behaviour in formal school settings? 2) To what extent does prosocial behaviour predict cognitive readiness and school-related outcomes? and, 3) How can educators promote the development of prosocial behaviour and related skills?

Recent Research Results

Researchers have recently identified several factors that promote the development of prosocial behaviour in young children. Researchers have continued to study prosocial behaviour in relation to perspective taking and theory of mind abilities, empathy, and emotion regulation skills.[2] Socialization experiences at home, including the communication of racial attitudes, have been found to predict prosocial tendencies in young children.[5,9] The quality of teacher-student relationships also has been related to prosocial behaviour in young children.[10,11] More specifically, teacher-student and peer relationships marked by emotional closeness and caring have been related positively to socially competent and prosocial forms of behaviour.[12]

The effects of prosocial behaviour on cognition and learning have been demonstrated by instructional programs focused on cooperative and collaborative learning structures. In this case, active discussion, problem solving, and elaborative feedback among peers who interact with each other in prosocial ways are associated with advances in a range of cognitive competencies (e.g., problem solving and conceptual understanding), and academic performance (grades and test scores) in samples ranging from preschool to high school.[13,14] Results of quasi-experimental and experimental studies suggest that the most successful cooperative learning activities are those that require positive interdependence among group members, individual accountability, face-to-face interactions among students, and learning social skills necessary to work cooperatively.[7]

Schoolwide policies and programs that accentuate the importance of students' prosocial development also are beginning to show promise.[8,15,16] Primary prevention programs can increase the prevalence of prosocial behaviours of preschool-aged children by improving classroom climate and the quality of teacher-student and peer interactions,[17] providing emotional support[18] and positive models of prosocial behaviour through media and role playing,[19,20] and directly

reinforcing positive behaviour and social skills.21 Programs targeted at elementary-aged students also have been successful at increasing displays of prosocial behaviour by teaching positive social skills,[22-24] and by implementing school-wide curriculum to reinforce positive behaviour, fostering cognitive and social problem solving, and building classroom unity and school-wide caring communities.[25,26]

Research Gaps

Recent evidence supports the notion that prosocial behaviour in young children contributes to school readiness and cognitive competencies; skills such as perspective taking, empathy, and self-regulation contribute to the development of prosocial behaviour, and socialization experiences with parents, teachers, and peers promote and sustain displays of positive behaviour at school. However, intervention studies that document causal connections between positive behaviour and its school-based antecedents and consequences, and longitudinal studies that document the long-term effects of prosocial behaviour on cognitive outcomes are rare. Future research is needed to clarify the causal nature of specific socialization processes, including the qualities and types of interactions that occur between young children and their parents, teachers, and peers. Multi-level studies of school contexts would also add to understanding of school-related influences on prosocial behavior,[27] as well as research on differences across developmental and cultural contexts.[28] Finally, identifying underlying processes and mechanisms that might explain positive associations between prosocial behaviour and cognitive abilities remains a challenge to the field.

Conclusions

Prosocial behaviour is a hallmark of social competence in children of all ages. However, it is clear that the developmental and socialization foundations of positive behaviour are rooted in early childhood. The importance of prosocial behaviour is supported by evidence that positive forms of behaviour are related positively to a range of psychological and emotional processes, to other socially competent outcomes, and to intellectual accomplishments in young children. Research findings also suggest that teachers and classmates have the potential to promote the development of prosocial behaviour by communicating norms and expectations for positive behaviour, creating emotionally positive classroom environments, and scaffolding the use of effective social cognitive and self-regulatory skills. However, programs specifically designed to train school personnel to do so are still in their infancy. Studies that focus on the long-term

impact of prosocial behaviour, such as those linking positive social behaviour in preschool settings to classroom behaviour and academic accomplishments in later grades also are needed.

Implications

Prosocial behaviour can contribute in important ways to children's social and academic success at school, and school contexts have the potential to provide essential supports for the development of these positive forms of social behaviour. At the preschool level, teachers can focus on creating emotionally supportive classroom environments, through establishing positive relationships with their students and by promoting positive interactions among students themselves. Strategies for creating caring classroom communities include practicing authoritative discipline, effective communication practices, and ensuring student safety.[29] Teaching and reinforcing positive social skills, and utilizing collaborative and cooperative learning activities can also promote displays of prosocial behaviour in classroom settings. At the school-level, utilization of curricula and primary prevention activities to promote prosocial behaviour in all classrooms also should be considered. Finally, school-initiated parent involvement programs should highlight practices that can promote the development of prosocial behaviour at home, including the use of inductive reasoning and parental modeling of positive social interactions.

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