ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

School Intervention and Prosocial Behaviour

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviour denotes a constellation of voluntary acts intended to benefit or improve the welfare of others.[1] These acts include helping, sharing, comforting, cooperating, volunteering, and protecting someone from harm or bullying. These are key behaviours not only for compassionate society but also for classrooms. In view of the accumulated evidence suggesting that young children's prosocial behaviour makes important contributions to their long-term school adjustment, academic success, and social and psychological wellbeing,[2-4] prosocial development is highly relevant for early education and intervention.

Subject

Work to promote prosocial behaviours in schools can now be found throughout the world. Efforts to make social-emotional learning an integral part of early education are more grounded in policy and practice than ever before. This new positive direction for education has vital implications for improving the lives of students and the whole ethos of schools. Prosocial behaviour is linked to greater empathy, self-confidence, and antisocial impulse regulation, higher

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grades, and more supportive relationships.[2,5-7] In order to ensure that prosocial education efforts meet their potential, schools need evidence-based directions for selecting and implementing practices and programs that have a demonstrated track record of effectiveness.

Problems

There are conceptual, research, and practice-related problems to overcome in order to promote young students' prosocial behaviours most effectively. Efforts to promote social and emotional development are often inappropriately assumed and interpreted to include prosocial behaviours, which may or may not be the case. For example, social skills are not synonymous with prosocial behaviour, unless the social skills that are targeted specifically include constructs that reflect acts intended to benefit others. The lack of care in defining and measuring specific prosocial behaviours has led researchers to conclude that the same school-based learning mechanisms that support other domains of social-emotional development will also directly promote the development of prosocial behaviour. Research has yet to establish what types of interventions are most successful in developing various prosocial behaviours. There are some promising models to follow,[8,9] but it is fair to say that to date there is not yet enough evidence to suggest that any one educational program has a proven track record for promoting children's decidedly prosocial behaviours. As a case in point, the largest U.S. randomized control evaluation of several evidence-based schoolwide social and character development programs provided little support for their overall effectiveness in improving the prosocial behaviour outcomes of students followed from third through fifth grades.[10] Finally, there is a need to translate what is learned from research into a set of practical guidelines and specific practices for teachers. It does little good to tell teachers that prosocial behaviours can be enhanced without informing them how to translate this knowledge into teachable moments and planned learning opportunities. Early childhood educators lack guidance and instruction for how to support children's prosocial behaviour; rarely are they observed reinforcing or encouraging prosocial behaviours of their students.[11,12] In fact, educators report both limited knowledge and professional learning opportunities as barriers for supporting social-emotional learning in their classrooms.[13]

Research Context

The vast majority of research in this field has occurred in the United Stated and Western Europe although educational systems throughout the world provide a cultural context for promoting prosocial behaviours. With the past decade's spotlight on the value of investments in prosocial

development for early childhood, various types of interventions have been evaluated.[14-16] Typically, interventions involve training teachers to follow a program that is designed to either develop specific prosocial behaviours or psychological processes that presumably underlie prosocial behaviour (e.g., empathy). The dosage and duration of interventions range widely. Some interventions target school culture, but schoolwide efforts generally are reserved for elementary and middle school-age students. Some partnerships with families have been developed but these rarely include an explicit focus on developing prosocial behaviours. Generally, evaluations of programs do not cover more than a school year and restrict their attention to the school context.

Key Research Questions

Several vital questions emerge from recent research on school-based intervention targeting young children's prosocial development:

- What are the more effective school curricula, teaching practices, and intervention dissemination methods that explicitly promote the development of prosocial behaviour in young learners of different ages, developmental stages, and cultural contexts?
- Are there differences in intervention effects across diverse populations (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, early-onset antisocial behaviour) and school settings?
- How can educators be trained, prepared, and supported to deliver evidence-informed practice effectively and to infuse prosocial instruction consistently into their regular academic curricula?
- How can school partnerships and collaborations with families and communities strengthen early intervention efforts?
- To what extent do early prosocial education efforts help set children on positive developmental trajectories toward academic success, adaptive behavioural regulation, positive interpersonal relationships, and responsible citizenship?

Recent Research Results

A rich history of research suggests tentative but useful starting points for supporting prosocial behaviour in schools. Promising interventions tend to emphasize a) caring relationships with adults and peers, b) adults modeling and reinforcing prosocial characteristics, c) training in empathy and perspective-taking, and d) active learning approaches such as cooperative learning.

[9,10,17-26] Important insights about features of more effective interventions can also be extrapolated from recent meta-analyses. The general picture from meta-analyses of educational or psychosocial interventions for school-age children is that overall mean effect size estimates range from .15 to .39 for positive social behaviours,[27] suggesting that some school-based interventions can contribute to important gains in prosocial development. The evidence base suggests that more effective social-emotional learning interventions meet S.A.F.E. criteria, or, in other words, interventions offer sequential activities to enhance step-by-step learning, use active forms of learning, provide focused time and attention on skill development, and establish explicit learning goals. In addition, the research suggests that schools do not need to introduce major reforms to be successful in the sense that a well-prepared and supported teaching staff can be successful in promoting students' prosocial behaviour.[27,28]

Research Gaps

Research needs to address what school-based practices and programs are most effective, for whom, and under what circumstances. Meta-analyses of the growing body of relevant treatment-control group intervention studies would do much more to clarify these issues than a reliance on findings from individual studies. Some research has suggested that perceived similarity to others lays the groundwork for prosociability.[29,30] These findings, in turn, suggest the potential value of developing and identifying interventions that enhance students' prosocial behaviours toward peers of different cultural and demographic backgrounds; this research area that has real implications for intergroup relations in increasingly multicultural societies remains largely uncharted territory. Finally, further research is needed to support solid conclusions about how to inspire and train educators and administrators to integrate routine prosocializing practices into their curricula.

Conclusions

Early education is in a strong position to develop and foster in young children the skills and motivation to be kind, caring, and compassionate in interactions, relationships, schools, homes, and communities. In order for prosocial education to meet its potential, it is important to recognize and overcome research-practice gaps and barriers to school implementation. Moving forward, an integrated approach that infuses both promising practices and programs into the daily fabric of classrooms and schools may be indispensable for prosocial education to be fully realized.[31] Empirically identifying and introducing daily routines to foster prosocial behaviour

within the regular school curriculum may circumvent some stumbling blocks of manual-based programs. Research suggests that educators are more likely to implement specific, simple, and adaptable interventions; school reforms that deliver a relative cost advantage and are achievable with existing structures are important at the policy level.[32] However, manual-based programs can also play important roles in prosocial education: they help unprepared teachers deliver focused intervention. It is therefore critical that intentional efforts are made to ensure that a school-based program demonstrates credible evidence of repeated effectiveness before becoming established in schools. As a final point, interventions are not one-size-fits-all. That culture is central to education signals that a transplant of interventions to different countries and sociocultural contexts without cultural tailoring may have limited success.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Prosocial education needs to start early at home and continue in preschool to frame positive behavioural expectations and to provide young learners with extended opportunities to learn the foundational skills of cooperation and helping so important for social and academic competence. This underscores the importance of developing strong school-family partnerships. The accumulated research indicates that schools and families may help children's prosocial development thrive by implementing teaching approaches and practices that emphasize caring relationships with adults and peers, active learning, prosocial models, positive reinforcement for prosocial behaviour, and empathy and perspective-taking training.[9,10,17-26] Successful interventions also tend to be sequenced, focused, and explicit in learning goals.[27] It is critical not to lose sight of the fact that all learning occurs in context and prosocial behaviours are enriched by a combination of school, home and community environments that nurture and reinforce children's capacities to constructively care for and help their fellow human beings.

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