



An exploratory study of teachers' perceptions of prosocial behaviors in preschool children



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the occurrences of prosocial behaviors in preschool children according to the perceptions of their teachers, examine if variations of prosocial behaviors exist among boys and girls, and analyze whether variations of prosocial behaviors exist among children. Independent schools teachers rated their perceptions of prosocial behavior of each child in their classes. Findings revealed that prosocial behaviors occurred at moderate levels irrespective of gender and school level. Girls displayed relatively more prosocial behaviors than their boy counterparts. Implications are discussed in the context of curriculum practices, pre-service teacher training, and professional development.

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1. Introduction

Schools today are fraught with challenging behaviors that lead to stressful and difficult environments for both students and teachers alike. The World Health Organization's 2014 global status report on violence prevention called for all countries to ramp up their violence prevention programs. The report found that only one third of the 133 countries surveyed were carrying out comprehensive initiatives to prevent violence, such as bullying prevention programs, and half of those countries were applying school-based programs to teach children non-violent conflict resolution skills. Empirical research also points out to the rise of violent and aggressive acts among school-age children (e.g., Belacchi and Farina, 2010; Young et al., 2006; Jalongo, 2006; Hanish et al., 2004; Meehan et al., 2003).

Children's social development is generally facilitated in the context of the unique, socialization experiences that they encounter at school (Fujisawa et al., 2008) and at home (Garner et al., 2008). Children's transactions in close relationships with their caregivers also serve to equip them with the tools to effectively learn how to handle their social environment (Hartup, 1989). Such experiences are likely to manifest themselves in prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping, collaborating, sharing, and empathizing with peers), or aggressive behaviors (e.g., hitting, bullying, manipulating, rejecting, teasing, and excluding their

peers). The latter four examples are indicative of relational aggression, which involves the deliberate, manipulative behaviors that children engage in (Hart and Ostrov, 2013; Swit and McNaugh, 2012; Ostrov and Keating, 2004). In a recent study, Renouf et al. (2010) found a negative correlation between preschoolers' relational aggression and prosocial behavior. Aggressive behavior in children has also been linked to deficits in various aspects of social and cognitive development (Meehan et al., 2003). In the same vein, Bierman et al. (2009) noted that children who exhibited low levels of prosocial behavior and high levels of aggressive acts were not excited about learning, lacked motivation, and had an extremely difficult time adhering to classroom rules. Moreover, kindergartners who displayed high levels of negative emotions tended to be less enthusiastic and less determined to participate in learning tasks and activities (Walker, 2009; Crawford and Bodine, 1996). This is critical because children possessing impoverished literacy skills "are likely to experience frustration and anxiety and difficulties in self-regulating emotions" (Hartas, 2012, p. 359), which is likely to further isolate them from their peers and teachers.

Prosocial behavior renders children more resilient, sociable, successful, and confident in themselves (Chen et al., 2002). In their 2010 study, Belacchi and Farina observed that primary school children who displayed prosocial behaviors (i.e., altruistic acts) were much more empathic than their counterparts who acted hostile towards their peers. The relationship between high empathy and prosocial behavior and low empathy and antisocial/aggressive behavior has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Trentacosta and Fine, 2010; Hughes et al., 2007;

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Findlay et al., 2006). Children's ability to empathize with their peers in social contexts is an indicator and precursor of their socio-emotional development. Eisenberg et al. (2004) explained that when children are capable of understanding and regulating their own emotions, they become more skilled at forming and sustaining social relationships with their peers. Similarly, children's ability to comprehend emotional cues was found to be positively correlated with their acquisition of advanced social skills, development of constructive relationships (Halberstadt et al., 2001) and academic skills (Trentacosta et al., 2007; McClelland, 2006; Welsh et al., 2001) than their classmates who trail behind in emotional development. For preschool children, social-emotional competence is not only related to classroom learning but it's also vital for enhancing their cognitive and affective development (Seifert, in press; Berk, 2014).

2. Current study

The majority of research studies examining prosocial behavior or social-emotional development in preschool children have been mainly conducted in North American and European contexts. Empirical investigations of similar constructs have not received much attention in the Gulf region. In Qatar, for instance, studies investigating children's prosocial behaviors in preschools are non-existent. Anecdotal support, from conversations with local school teachers, pre-service teachers' classroom observations, and round-table discussions with both faculty members and students about the rise of children's aggressive behavior acts in schools motivated the researchers to conduct this study, which would help us gain a working familiarity with the extent to which children's prosocial behaviors are present in the preschool classroom. This is critical because students who exhibit antisocial behaviors are even more challenged with the prospect of social competence and academic success as continual conflict is likely to invade their thought processes and disturbs their ability to learn. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the occurrences of prosocial behaviors in preschool children according to the perceptions of their teachers, examine if variations of prosocial behaviors exist among boys and girls, and analyze whether variations of prosocial behaviors exist among Kindergarten 1 (KG 1) and Kindergarten 2 (KG 2) children.

This study has the potential to contribute to the field of early childhood education, especially from a social-emotional development perspective, for the following reasons:

First, it will provide useful information about the types and frequency of children's prosocial behaviors that are present in Qatari preschools according to teachers' perceptions. Such information will serve as both a "baseline" and a "catalyst" for planning future research initiatives on various dimensions of social-emotional development at the preschool and primary (K-6) levels, such as teacher training programs, promoting social competence, school-home partnerships, and empowering families with practical tools to enrich children's social-emotional development. Such initiatives are in line with the first two objectives of the QNRS Pillar: Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities: Developing a knowledge base in science of learning and families, as well as the Human Development and Social Development outcomes of Qatar National Vision 2030 (General Secretariat For Development Planning, 2008).

Second, findings from the study will afford us the opportunity to investigate whether variations of prosocial behaviors exist among boys and girls. Gender differences in children's prosocial behaviors have been corroborated in a number of studies. Girls tend to engage in more prosocial behaviors while boys are known to be physically more aggressive (Belacchi and Farina, 2012; Altay and Gure, 2012; Hastings et al., 2007; Dodge et al., 2006). Belacchi and Farina (2010) studied preschoolers' dispositions for empathy,

emotional understanding, and prosocial/hostile behaviors. The researchers found that girls displayed more prosocial roles than the boys, and that they outperformed them in comprehending emotions. From a cross-cultural stance, results from this component of our study will further contribute to as well as enhance our understanding of the gender role in prosocial behaviors.

Third, from a developmental perspective, an analysis of prosocial behaviors variation according to age (i.e., between children in Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2 levels) will enable us to examine if those prosocial behaviors displayed by preschoolers in each cohort are congruent with the social-development milestones that are deemed appropriate for their respective levels. Children at an older, developmental period are expected to display more prosocial roles than their developmentally younger peers, and the tendency to adopt such roles does increase with age (Belacchi and Farina, 2010).

This normative information related gender and age variations in prosocial behaviors can be vital for early childhood educators and researchers alike in terms of effectively planning and developing individualized programs and assessing their effects (Denham et al., 2012). The outcomes of such programs that aim to promote children's positive social behavior and interpersonal skills will also serve to indirectly curb incidents of aggressive/hostile acts in schools. This will be the first study that investigates prosocial behavior in preschool settings. To the best of our knowledge, no single preschool, primary school, middle school, or high school in Qatar has ever empirically examined children's prosocial behaviors based on teachers' perceptions. Thus, findings from this study will likely motivate and engage other researchers to explore this important topic across different, developmental junctures from preschool to high school. From a cross-cultural perspective, this study will also contribute to the body of literature on the prevalence and outcomes of prosocial behaviors in preschools.

The aim of this research was to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the frequency of prosocial behaviors in preschool children?
- (2) How do KG1 children compare to their KG2 counterparts on prosocial behavior and social competence?
- (3) How do girls and boys compare on prosocial behavior and social competence?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 22 preschool teachers from 10 independent schools in Doha, Qatar. Half of them were teaching children in the Kindergarten 1 (KG 1) level; the other half were teaching children in the Kindergarten 2 (KG 2) level. They provided data on a total of 472 children.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument that was used in this study is the Prosocial Behaviors of Children-Teachers' Perceptions (Dahlberg et al., 2005), which consists of 19 items. Three subscale (School Adjustment-Peer Preferred Behavior-Teacher Preferred Behavior) scores were calculated by adding individual items in addition to a fourth aggregate scale (Prosocial Behavior and Social Competence): School Adjustment-7 items (e.g., "the child displays independent study skills"); Peer Preferred Behavior-7 items (e.g., "the child initiates conversation with peers in informal situations"); Teacher Preferred Behavior-5 items (e.g., "the child can accept not getting his/her own way"). A high score on any of the

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