



Pro-social behavior is predictive of academic success via peer acceptance: A study of Chinese primary school children

Qingke Guo, Jing Zhou*, Linlin Feng

Department of Psychology, Shandong Normal University, China



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ABSTRACT

The predictive value of pro-social behavior on children's psycho-social and civic development has been well documented by previous literature. But in Chinese schools children's pro-social development is still undervalued. This study was designed to investigate the potential benefits of pro-social behavior on Chinese children's academic achievement. With 456 primary school students as participants, we examined the value of pro-social behavior on children's academic outcomes and the mediating mechanism. Data was obtained from various sources (self-report, peer-rating, peer nomination, and cognitive tests). The results showed that Chinese children's pro-social behavior, regardless of self-reported or peer-rated, positively predicted their academic achievement, and peer acceptance played a mediating role in the pathway. These findings highlighted the importance of children's pro-social behavior in building positive relationships with peers and facilitating academic achievement. Chinese educators are suggested to put more weight on cultivating children's pro-social behavior that is beneficial for children's psychological and social well-being.

1. Introduction

Pro-social behavior, a term coined by Wispe (1972) as an antonym for antisocial behavior, applies to any action that “benefits others or at the very least promotes harmonious relations with others” (Hay, 1994; p.33). It is an umbrella term covering a range of positive social behaviors, such as giving, helping, cooperating, sharing, and consoling (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015; Hay, 1994). Such behavior is considered to be altruistic if it is motivated by a genuine desire to benefit others without any expectation of reward (Hay, 1994). Over the years, with increasing interest in discovering earlier predictors of children's and adolescents' positive development, the function of pro-social behavior has received great concern from developmental and educational psychologists. Sufficient evidence indicates that pro-social behavior is positively related to social competence (Caprara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000) and psychological well-being (Eisenberg et al., 2015), and is negatively related to externalizing and internalizing problems (Carlo et al., 2014; Padilla-Walker, Carlo, & Nielson, 2015).

Beyond these psycho-social outcomes, earlier pro-social behavior can also pave the way to later academic success (Caprara et al., 2000). Numerous correlational and longitudinal studies provide evidence that pro-social behavior can be a strong predictor of academic achievement and social preferences (Caprara et al., 2000; Wentzel, 1991, 1993). The

significant link between pro-social behavior and academic achievement was also confirmed by considerable intervention studies, showing that pro-social skill training can exert positive effects on children's psychological and social development as well as academic success (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015; Top, Liew, & Luo, 2016).

As children grow older, peers may play more and more important roles in the social support system (Valle, Bravo, & López, 2010; van Rijsewijk, Dijkstra, Pattiselanno, Steglich, & Veenstra, 2016). Children who engage in pro-social behavior in daily school life are more likely to be accepted by their peers and thus can develop positive interpersonal relationships (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Children with positive peers relationship tend to achieve more material (e.g. sharing learning resources) and emotional (e.g. mitigate the negative effects of academic pressure) support from peers, and have a higher sense of belonging and greater engagement at school, which contribute to their academic development (Boulton, Don, & Boulton, 2011; Gallardo, Barrasa, & Guevara-Viejo, 2016; Raposa, Laws, & Ansell, 2016; Wentzel, 1993). These findings suggest that time spent on cultivating pro-social behavior is not wasted, because increased pro-social behavior can promote students' social functioning and eventually facilitate their academic pursuit.

To date, there is a scarcity of literature from China exploring the relationship between children's pro-social behavior and academic

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Shandong Normal University, No. 88 East Wenhua Road, Jinan 250014, China.
E-mail address: zhoujingpsy@163.com (J. Zhou).

development. Academic performance is still the primary evaluation standard of the quality of education in China (Hesketh & Ding, 2005; Jerrim, 2015). Chinese educators and parents generally place greater value on education. For example, Chinese parents make great effort to choose a high quality school for their children and are more willing to invest in out-of-school tuition. More importantly, Chinese parents have successfully instilled a hard-work ethics in their children, making the children believe that they should have a high aspiration for the future and reach the goals with effort (Jerrim, 2015). As a result, students are pushed to spend almost all of their time in learning activities, leaving social engagement being seriously undervalued (Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004). These educational beliefs may exert negative influences on children's psychological and social well-being (Hesketh & Ding, 2005; Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier, & Fang, 2015). Findings indicated that Chinese children are more likely to experience negative emotion (e.g. depression, anxiety) than their American counterparts (Parmar et al., 2004).

Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the predictive value of pro-social behavior on Chinese children's academic achievement and related mechanism. If its positive association with academic performances is proved, pro-social behavior, which has been considered by many educators to be dispensable, can be put back into its proper position in Chinese schools.

1.1. Pro-social behavior is associated with academic achievement

Existing literature suggests a positive link between pro-social behavior and academic performance, showing that pro-social children, regardless of gender or grade, are more likely to achieve desirable academic outcomes (Flook et al., 2015; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Normandeau & Guay, 1998). Longitudinal and experimental studies further suggest that the positive link between pro-social behavior and academic achievement may be causal (Caprara et al., 2000; Flook et al., 2015). For example, Caprara et al. (2000) found that pro-social behavior in 3rd grade explained 35% and 37% of the variance in elementary children's academic achievement and social preferences 5 years later. These effects remained robust after earlier academic achievement and aggressive behavior were controlled for. Moreover, early academic achievement showed no effect on later academic achievement after early pro-social behavior was controlled for. Gerbino et al. (2017) also found that 7th and 8th grade students' pro-social behavior can successfully predict their academic outcomes several years later.

School-based intervention programs also confirmed the critical role of pro-social behavior in contributing to children's academic success (Caprara et al., 2014; Caprara, Kanacri, Zuffianò, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2015; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016; Flook et al., 2015; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). For example, Top et al. (2016) found that programs designed to increase pro-social behavior through a series of social-emotion training lead to improved academic performance across 4 school semesters. These studies suggested that increase in pro-social behavior can promote children's academic performance over time.

1.2. Pro-social behavior, peer acceptance, and academic achievement

Sufficient evidence supports the association between children's pro-social behavior and academic achievement. However, the mechanism underlying this link has not been soundly addressed. Previous literature suggests that children's cognitive development is significantly influenced by social contexts or environmental factors (Caprara et al., 2000; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). Peer relationship may be such a factor that exerts strong influences on children's academic development (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). Literature shows that children who gain peer acceptance and engage positive peer interactions have better academic outcomes than children with negative peer interactions (DeRosier & Lloyd, 2011; Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005; Gallardo et al., 2016; Walters & Bowen, 1997). For example, O'Neil, Welsh,

Parke, Wang, and Strand (1997) found that peer acceptance was positively associated with academic success, while peer rejection was significantly related to academic difficulties. Gallardo et al. (2016) found that peer acceptance and friendship could successfully predict students' academic success in the next semester. Véronneau, Vitaro, Brendgen, Dishion, and Tremblay (2010) found that lower levels of academic achievement was associated with increase in peer rejection, which in turn predicted decrease in academic functioning.

In addition, previous studies found that some social behaviors, such as giving timely help to peers and being cooperative with others, are contributive to positive peer relationships (Bowker et al., 2010; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Layouts et al., 2012; Peters, Cillessen, Riksen-Walraven, & Haselager, 2010). For example, a 4-week longitudinal experiment conducted by Layouts et al. (2012) found that children who performed three acts of kindness showed significant increases in peer acceptance than students who visited three places. Bowker et al. (2010) verified the importance of pro-social behavior in contributing to new friendship formation both for the initially best-friendless children and the best-friended children. The benefit of pro-social behavior on peer acceptance appears to be robust for children in kindergartens, elementary schools, and middle schools (Buhs, 2001; Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007).

The above mentioned studies suggest that peer acceptance may be a mediating variable between pro-social behavior and academic achievement. This mechanism has gained support from previous literature. Positive peer relationships, such as being accepted, respected and supported in pro-social interactions can increase children's feeling of academic competence, which is conducive to better academic functioning (Flook et al., 2005; Legault, Greendemers, & Pelletier, 2006). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) also found that pro-social children are more likely to be accepted by peers and thus engender a stronger sense of belonging to schools, which is conducive to greater engagement in academic tasks. Furthermore, pro-social children are more likely to acquire useful information and skills from peers, thereby achieving a high level of academic achievement (Ma, 2003). In contrast, a lack of social association may undermine information sharing with other students, and may lead to the misunderstanding of knowledge (Krause, Stark, & Mandl, 2009).

1.3. The present study

East Asian students' excellent performance on PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) has caught the attention of many Western educators (Bennett & Bell, 2004; Sue & Abe, 1995). High value put on education and hard work ethics can partly account for why East Asian children outperform their Western counterparts. Chinese educators and parents exert strong pressure on children to reach desirable academic outcomes (Jerrim, 2015). This may impede children's mental health and psycho-social development (Hesketh & Ding, 2005). Thus, the main purpose of this study was to examine whether Chinese children's pro-social behavior is positively associated with their academic achievement, and whether peer acceptance mediates the relation between them. Answering this question will remind Chinese educators of the importance of pro-social behavior in facilitating children's peer relationships and academic development. This is valuable because pro-social behavior not only contributes to children's psycho-social development (e.g. social competence, psychological well-being; Eisenberg et al., 2015), but is also conducive to their civic development in the long run (Feng & Guo, 2017).

It is deserved to note that several features may increase the robustness of this study. First, a predictive design was adopted to examine the positive value of pro-social behavior on academic achievement over time. Specifically, pro-social behavior was assessed at the beginning of the semester, and peer acceptance and academic achievement were assessed at the end of the semester. This design, relative to a cross-sectional study design, may provide more strong evidence that

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