

COHESION

*citizenship education
on social inclusion*

SCIENTIFIC REPORT COHESION

LITERATURE REVIEW ON PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

2019



Co-funded by the Erasmus+
Programme of the European Union

TABLE OF CONTENT

- INTRODUCTION..... 3
- PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR EXPLAINED 4
 - Prosocial approaches**..... 4
 - Effect and influence** 5
 - Social skills 6
 - Academic skills 6
 - Resilience 7
 - Target audience 7
- PROSOCIAL INCLUSION 8
 - Intergroup contact 8
- IMPLEMENTATION..... 9
 - Teachers’ role**..... 9
 - Bigger than the classroom** 10
- RECCOMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS 11
 - Material**..... 11
 - Presentation and promotion**..... 11
 - Summarizing, intervention requirements** 12
- REFERENCES 13

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed upon that schools are no longer just a place where students are thought in knowledge. Of course, the 'regular' curriculum with courses stretching from math to geography are still important. Today however, education also focuses on the social and emotional development of students. How can schools support them in becoming well-functioning adolescents and adults, capable of achieving their potential in their (academic) career and social life?

The prevention of radicalization and polarization can be approached from two perspectives. First of all, one can discuss and explain different elements of radicalisation and why they are dangerous, misleading, or morally wrong – tell students what not to do. Besides this 'negative approach' prevention can also be aimed for by promoting democratic values, positive identity and other forms of prosocial behavior – tell students what to do. Literature on this latter, positive, approach will be discussed in the following chapter. How is prosocial behavior interpreted? How effective is integrating it into lesson plans? What factors contribute to the showing of prosocial behavior amongst students?

Ultimately this review aims to describe how this type of behavior can be implemented in a school environment. What are essential elements in a program? What are the needs of teachers? And of school boards? In other words: how can prosocial behavior be promoted in the classroom?

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR EXPLAINED

Research shows that students are less likely to experience problematic functioning and social difficulties if they can think of multiple solutions, oversee the consequences of a solution or action and understand how reactions (of others) in the past have determined the outcome of a situation (Dymnicki et al. 2011). This asks for well-developed social skills and indicates that social and emotional development are essential aspects of education for youth. It enhances their personality development, which in turn has a positive effect on their educational career. In this stage of overall youth development, national and cultural context are of no influence on the results (Sklad et al. 2012). Therefore, schools are not solely tasked with teaching cognitive academic skills. On the contrary, the teaching of social and emotional skills can be considered a core task of school systems. These skills can also be described as 'emotional intelligence'. This covers the competences for the recognition and managing of emotions, effective problem solving, and establishing positive relationships (Sklad et al. 2012).

Prosocial behavior covers many characteristics which, as a whole, enable one to participate in nowadays society. This regardless age, social-economic situation or level of education. Prosocial behavior comes down to the very essence of pleasant human interaction. Therefore, programs or tools that include the development of prosocial behavior are focused on competences which enhance social interaction. Such programs or interventions go by many names. This review will discuss four of them: *Positive Youth Development* (PYD) initiated by *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL), *Social, Emotional and Behavioral* (SEB) and the *Kindness Curriculum* (KC).

Prosocial approaches

Positive youth development (PYD) enables youth to engage in so-called *constructive bidirectional interaction* (Taylor et al. 2017). This includes areas like self-control, interpersonal skills, problem solving quality of relationships (both with peers and adults) and commitment to education. In other words, PYD both promotes positive and prevents negative behavior. It aims to lead young people onto a path of self-development on which they can fully realize their potential (Taylor et al. 2017). To reach PYD, the school curriculum was reconstructed around the idea of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This included adding extra focus on social competences and relationships.

School-based SEL aims to create a school environment in which both students and adults are enabled to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for enhancing personal development, social relationships, ethical behavior and effective and productive work. This is achieved by focusing on five main interrelated competences that allow success in both school and social life:

- Self-awareness: learning how to recognize emotions, values, strengths and limitations;
- Self-management: regulating these emotions and behaviors;
- Social awareness: learning about perspective taking and empathy for diverse backgrounds and cultures;
- Relationship skills: learning to build and maintain healthy relationships with peers and adults;
- Responsible decision making: acquiring the ability to choose constructively across varied situations.

(Taylor et al. 2017).

Schools are the main place for social, emotional and behavioral development of youth. Besides the socializing context (peer students), students spend the majority of their time in this environment. These characteristics make schools a great place to introduce such interventions. (Goldberg et al. 2018). Following this, school-based social, emotional and/or behavioral (SEB) programs, generally have a positive influence on a variety of competences that are ought to be essential in youth development (Sklad et al. 2012). A universal SEB program does not focus solely on children or adolescents at risk but rather on a general group of them (Sklad et al. 2012).

Another example of such a school-based approach is the Kindness Curriculum (KC). This program works with a mindfulness-based method. From this starting point, students were schooled in social skills and (inter-) group contact (Flook et al. 2015).

Effect and influence

The programs or approaches mentioned above all aim to be an essential positive influence on youth. As they are already piloted or even fully active in schools, one can also look into the results of the interventions. Which effects were found, and what was the influence of the programs on the students' competences?

Research shows that the effects are overwhelmingly positive. Although the focus of the intervention may differ between various programs, the best results are primarily found in the same areas. These improved skills and competences can be divided into three main categories – social skills, academic skills and resilience.

Social skills

The most impressive results come from the social skills area. To start with, students who received lessons with one of the prosocial programs, showed more positive attitudes at school (Taylor et al. 2017; Flook et al. 2015; Durlak et al. 2011). Students became more able to establish and maintain social relationships with peers due to an improvement in all five main competences of SEL (Taylor et al. 2017; Flook et al. 2015).

Interventions aimed at problem solving, had had a positive effect on students' social interactions too. They were able to identify and make use of multiple reactions and solutions when making friends or joining a group. Furthermore, this skill helped them when asking for help or favors and enabled them to engage in conflict resolution (Dymnicky et al. 2011). The list goes on. Examples are a more positive self-image (Sklad et al. 2012), improved perspective taking (Kahn and Zeidler 2016) and even better health (Flook et al. 2015; Flouri and Sarmadi 2016).

Academic skills

There is a growing acceptance of the positive effect of well-developed self-regulatory skills on school success. Regulating attention and emotion enables students to study, learn and build social relationships. These are key aspects in the life on any young person (Flook et al. 2015).

Although it thus might be the case that these effects are partly the result of improvement of social skills, the effects on educational progress and engagement were found to be very positive too (Sklad et al. 2011; Flook et al. 2015). Students' school attendance was higher amongst those who received education in which prosocial behavior was integrated (Taylor et al. 2017;). This cannot be seen separate from the fact that they scored higher grades (Taylor et al. 2017;) and were more likely to graduate from secondary education (Taylor et al. 2017; Flook et al. 2015;).

The positive effect effects were found to last up to over 3,75 years (Taylor et al. 2017) and there are results who go even beyond the youth stage of life. Obtaining good health (Flouri and Sarmadi 2016; Flook et al. 2015), and financial stability (Flook et al. 2015) are likely future outcomes from well-developed prosocial skills. This backs up research that found that prosocial behavior (or the lack of it) is somewhat determining for future prosocial behavior. Non-prosocial behavior (in this case aggression) by students is amplified when their peers are showing non-prosocial behavior too (Dymnicky et al. 2011).

Resilience

Where the programs strengthened and sustained prosocial skills, they also reduced or even diminished anti-social behavior (Sklad et al. 2012). Students who engaged in PYD approaches showed significantly less receptive for conduct problems, emotional distress and substance abuse. Additionally, they will be less likely to be affected by challenges and disappointments. Even the likeliness of being arrested or diagnosed with clinical or mental disorders was lower amongst students who received prosocial education (Taylor et al. 2017; Sklad et al. 2012).

Target audience

The results for KC interventions regard the effect in the classroom as a whole. Children who were ought to start the program with less developed social competences experienced even bigger progress (Flook et al. 2015). The results did barely differ between elementary, middle and high school. The area in which the school was located was of no importance either. Positive results were accomplished in rural, sub-urban and urban environments (Durlak et al. 2011). This aligns with the longer existing belief that (SEL) in schools can positively affect students from diverse family backgrounds and geographic contexts (Flouri and Sarmadi 2016; Taylor et al. 2017). However, when someone's prosocial behavior is less well-developed, the negative effects on their future (socially and health) are bigger if this person grew up in a disadvantaged neighborhood or visited a low-performing school. This means that school-based interventions regarding prosocial behavior are especially important in low-performing schools. These schools should receive extra incentives to engage in such programs (Flouri and Sarmadi 2016).

When students show prosocial behavior, this has a positive effect on any aggressive or otherwise asocial behavior of peer students. In other words: developing prosocial behavior amongst students is even beneficial for those who, at first glance, do not seem to be positively influenced by an intervention. In time, their peers will add to the influence of the intervention (Dymnicky et al. 2011).

PROSOCIAL INCLUSION

In the overall aim of this project, we seek to provide youth with social competences that enable them to successfully participate in the society they live in. The prevention of being polarized or polarizing yourself is very important in this. It therefore makes sense that many publications regarding prosocial behavior look into the social competences that are necessary to participate in a society that consists out of a variety of (sometimes overlapping or crossing) groups. Intergroup threat and negative feelings towards an out-group are likely to lower intergroup contact and impede positive social relationships between members from different groups. They can thus be considered to be risk factors that should be encountered. For example within training programs (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014).

Moreover, social relationships are essential for academic achievements, since students do not learn 'alone'. They do so in a classroom together with other students, their teachers and supported by their parents. Schools should thus acknowledge the importance and impact of social relationships and their role in strengthening this (Durlak et al. 2011).

Intergroup contact

It is possible to prevent prejudice and promote intergroup attitudes through psychological and educational training of both children and adolescents. Intergroup acceptance or prejudice are especially important for elementary school age children. Nevertheless, by adjusting the message to a 'developmentally appropriate' one, intervention is possible at all ages (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014).

One of the main deterrents of successfully influencing intergroup attitudes is the ability of a program to establish personal relationships (or even friendships) between members of different groups. In a school environment, one can overcome this contact bias by introducing exchange programs, out-group educators or even role play. In the case of the last option, these roles are preferably played by adults. In this way, children from other (out-group) schools can meet and learn from other groups (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014). In Utrecht, the Netherlands, the organization *Vreedzame Wijk*¹ (peaceful neighborhood) is a beautiful example of such an exchange program in which children meet peers from other neighborhoods.

Direct contact results in more improvement of intergroup attitudes than any way of indirect contact such as the spreading of knowledge and awareness. However, this merely means that the positive results of direct contact are more substantial. As direct contact is not always possible because it means the out-group has to be physically present, indirect contact can be used to build the bridge for possible future

¹ Stichting Vreedzaam, http://stichtingvreedzaam.nl/vreedzame_wijk/startpagina.html (Dutch).

direct contact Accordingly, indirect contact should not at all be avoided, since it can still be effective too (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014).

IMPLEMENTATION

As the section above provides the content of to be developed lesson materials, it is just as important to develop an program or curriculum in such a way that it will be used. In the end it will be the teachers who are working with the materials, and accordingly, the teachers who make the materials work. In the words of Durlak et al. (2011):

“Developing an evidence-based intervention is an essential but insufficient condition for success; the program must also be well-executed”

Teachers’ role

Findings presented above already indicated that it is important that teachers play a key role in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of their students (Taylor et al. 2017). In this role they will need support to successfully implement lesson material building on a SEL approach and they rely on researchers and program developers to keep them updated on necessary adaption within the used interventions (Taylor et al. 2017). When this is done sufficiently, prosocial behavior can be integrated in everyday interactions, social contacts and lessons. In that case it is not necessary to bring external staff into the classroom to deliver the program, teacher will be able to do so themselves (Durlak et al. 2011; Sklad et al. 2012).

Since the teachers’ role as the activator of the materials is largely determining for its outcome, it is important to already acknowledge the role of teachers (or other educators) who will be working with a program during the developmental stage of it. Interventions which ensured the teacher was actively involved, seemed to be significantly more effective. Moreover, programs that did not manage to line up with the teachers’ wishes and needs are less likely to have an significant positive effect on intergroup attitudes (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014). Even when a program is already selected, teachers can (and should) be assisted with the implementation of the program in a manner that ensures intervention results to last (Goldberg et al. 2018).

Bigger than the classroom

The most successful interventions are the ones that engage all staff, are not limited to the classroom, but rather cover the entire school (including hallways and playgrounds etc.) and include parental engagement and community context (Goldberg et al. 2018). By engaging parents, a program covers almost the entire 'life' of a student. This coverage could even be increased through collaboration with the community component (contact with subgroups, community leaders, social workers and media). Learning is extended beyond school in this way and makes good use of other social context in which the children can develop social, emotional and behavioral skills. (Goldberg et al. 2018). All staff, but also parents and students themselves should collaborate to incorporate the intervention in every day interactions, social contacts and lessons (Goldberg et al. 2018).

At the same time, the implementation of school-wide interventions is potentially troublesome. Planning and support are essential when parents and community partners are embedded in the program. This requires a comprehensive infrastructure and is therefore difficult to fully deploy and implement. Activating the national educational system might be necessary to advise schools on 'what matters' (Goldberg et al. 2018). This might be problematic when officials want to restrain themselves from infringing the freedom of education. However, such 'advice' can also be in the form of enabling schools to engage in programs that they can select themselves by allocating budget.

RECCOMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS

Material

When it comes to the actual materials it is essential that (future) program developers and researchers are aware of the fact that such indiscriminate positive effects as mentioned above, are only achieved if their interventions are designed in a way that considers cultural context and influence. In addition to this it should remain a priority for future research to keep identifying attitudes that might be effective for enhancing later well-being (Taylor et al. 2017).

Cognitive and behavioral aspects of intergroup attitudes are easier to train, adjust and influence than the emotional aspect. This might be the case because emotions are predominantly indicated from a positive perspective (sympathy and liking). These positive aspect tend to be rather unaffected by interventions. Nevertheless, when one looks at changing negative emotional aspects of intergroup attitudes (anger, fear and intergroup threat) this shows more perceptiveness for external influence (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014). New materials should be evaluated with regard to the change of such 'negative' emotions. This increases the experienced 'success' of a program.

Presentation and promotion

Not only teachers need to be enthusiastic about the materials. School boards are the entity that will decide whether an intervention is integrated in the school's current program. For them it might be extra interesting when an intervention results in positive effects, when it is not necessary to reschedule the entire curriculum. For example, the fact that the rather brief KC intervention already has a positive influence on academic and prosocial competencies amongst the students, makes the program cost-effective (Flook et al. 2015). Although the topic is unpopular, cost-effectiveness is an important consideration when selecting a program. Of course this is difficult to provide with a newly developed intervention. However, when effect studies have been conducted, their results should be included in the manual or guide (Sklad et al. 2012).

To accommodate for teachers, it is recommended to integrate a program in everyday school activities. Additions to a curriculum tend to be received rather reluctantly, whereas schools already face deficits in time and personnel (Beelmann & Heinemann 2014; Goldberg et al. 2018; Flook et al. 2015).











Schools that are intending to engage their students in an intervention, should consider the right program carefully and might need assistance in this (Sklad et al. 2012; Goldberg et al. 2018). Sklad developed four questions for this. A well-suited program can be identified by an positive answer on the following questions:

- Does the program use a connected and coordinated set of activities to achieve its objectives relative to skill development?
- Does the program use active forms of learning to help youth learn new skills?
- Does the program have at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills?
- Does the program target specific skills focused on social and emotional learning rather than targeting skills or positive development in general terms?

Additionally, program developers could accommodate a school in this analysis by providing the answers to these questions in a clear and structured program manual or training guide (Sklad et al. 2012). Additionally, evidence-based programs should be promoted as such (Goldberg et al. 2018).

Summarizing, intervention requirements

A newly developed intervention should:

-  Promote prosocial behavior, it works!
-  Be evidence based;
-  Include social skills like engaging in (peer) relationships, perspective taking, decision making, self- and social awareness;
-  Be addressing students from a variety of ages (8-18 y/o);
-  Include a mindfulness approach (or possibly section);
-  Promote intergroup contact;
-  Preferably include parents and/or the community;
-  Be focused on and adjusted to teachers' needs during development;
-  Allow for current cultural context;
-  Be accompanied by a program manual/guide and possible assistance with selecting the right materials;

REFERENCES

- Beelmann, A. and Heinemann, K.S. (2014). 'Preventing prejudice and improving intergroup attitudes: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent training programs'. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 35. Pp.10-24.
- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. and Schellinger, K.B. (2011). 'The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions'. *Child Development*. 82(1). Pp.405-432.
- Dymnicki, A.B., Weissberg, R.P. and Henry, D.B. (2011). 'Understanding programs work to prevent overt aggressive behaviors: A meta-analysis of mediators of elementary school-based programs'. *Journal of School Violence*. 10(4). Pp.315-337.
- Flook, L., Goldberg, S.B., Pinger, L. and Davidson, R.J. (2015). 'Promoting prosocial behavior and self-regulatory skills in preschool children through a mindfulness-based kindness curriculum'. *Dev Psychol*. 51(1). Pp.44-51.
- Flouri, E. and Sarmadi, Z. (2015). 'Prosocial Behavior and Childhood Trajectories of Internalizing and Externalizing Problems: The Role of Neighborhood and School Contexts'. *Developmental Psychology*. 52(2). Pp.253-258.
- Goldberg, J.M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T.R., Schreurs, K.M.G., Bohlmeijer, E.T. and Clarke, A.M. (2018). 'Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: A meta-analysis'. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*. Online publication.
- Kahn, S. and Zeidler, D.L. (2016). 'Using our Heads and HARTSS*: Developing Perspective-Taking Skills for Socioscientific Reasoning (*Humanities, ARTs, and Social Sciences)'. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*. 27(3). Pp.261-281.
- Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., de Ritter, M., Ben, J. and Gravesteyn, C. (2012). 'Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior and adjustment?' *Psychology in the Schools*. 49(9). Pp.892-909.
- Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J.A. and Weissberg, R.P. (2017). 'Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects'. *Child Development*. 88(4). Pp.1156-1171.

COHESION

*citizenship education
on social inclusion*

cohesion.eu



Co-funded by the Erasmus+
Programme of the European Union

