Prosocial Education: Developing Caring, Capable Citizens

Philip M. Brown, Ph.D

Center for Applied Psychology, Rutgers University

Prepared for: *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network Meeting*

December 6-7, 2012

One of the ways democracies focus their search for social stability and their hopes for their country's future is through our investment in public education. It is one deposit box of our beliefs and views of who we are. Thus, decisions regarding issues such as curriculum content, testing, how schools are organized and structured are not only issues about how to educate our children, they represent an aspect of our vision for our future. It is why we expect so much of schools.

Education, like a coin, has two sides. In the same way that a coin must have a head and a tail, so too must education realize two goals—one, that children learn and become critically knowledgeable, and two that they develop into mature, productive, and ethical citizens—this second goal is the purpose of prosocial education (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2011; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). By referring to education as a two sided coin we are accurately describing what education is; that it is the curricula, teaching and learning—the academic side; and it is the relationships among teachers and students, the climate of schooling in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and playground, and the social glue that binds one generation to the next and enables families, communities and society to thrive, change, and grow—the prosocial side.

The Purpose of Prosocial Education

Children develop socially in their families, with peers in their neighborhoods and youth organizations, and through actively participating in their schools and classrooms. Religious institutions are important in the social development of some children. While all these environments and experiences are important for the full development of children, *schools* are the primary, but certainly not only, place for the *prosocialization* of our children because we expect that while our children are learning they are also growing up and maturing in schools. It could be said that families *socialize* children; however, schools *prosocialize* them. We expect our children to be able to *share* with acquaintances and strangers, to *make friends*, to *work cooperatively*, and

to *develop a sense of self as a moral person*. Ultimately we hope they will grow into *productive people and engaged citizens* of a democracy. The ways in which children make friends, learn to work with others—both adults and peers, and begin to know who they are must be nurtured and taught (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932; Roeser & Peck, 2009; Selman & Schultz, 1990). Both the development and the teaching, whether conscious or not, of these prosocial attitudes and skills takes place in school. Schools are the practice ground for prosocial development and education (Schecter, 2011; Selman, 2003).

Prosocial education is an umbrella term that denotes all the various ways in which teachers develop effective classroom learning environments and teach the whole child, principals encourage positive school climates, superintendents assess the health and productivity of their systems, and communities and parents contribute to the well-being and thriving of their children.

Prosocial education includes any approach, intervention, or program which focuses on promoting and/or teaching the emotional, social, moral, and civic capacities that express character and facilitate student development of increased autonomy, purpose, responsibility, sense of connectedness to school and community and, sense of themselves as active, effective participants in our society.

Science has confirmed that these capacities, essential to full citizenship, are first evident in infancy and develop through young adulthood and beyond, and how successful we are at helping our children grow into these skills and dispositions is heavily dependent upon the kinds of supportive and stimulating environments we provide (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Eccles et al., 1993). Prosocial education utilizes socialization processes such as trusting and respectful relationships, cooperative activities, building positive norms and expectations as well as perspective-taking and challenging discussions of civic and personal responsibilities, values, and dilemmas to create both positive school climates and cultures and to promote student and teacher/staff development (Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010; Higgins-D'Alessandro, Guo, Sakwarawich, & Guffey, 2011; Weinstock, Assor, & Broide, 2009). A large body of evidence suggests that prosocial education approaches that create positive and engaging classrooms and schools in which students feel safe, respected, and recognized also are schools in which all students are motivated and most succeed academically (e.g., Elias, DeFini, & Bergmann, 2010; Gettinger & Stoiber, 1999). Prosocial education sets positive developmental trajectories that enable people to live healthy,

productive adult lives connected to their neighborhoods and nation and critically engaged in its governance and future (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Sameroff, 2009).

All prosocial education efforts share a basic and expansive approach to child development and educational philosophy based on three principles:

1. Every child has the right to learn in a humane, supportive environment;
2. Respect for each and every individual should pervade principals', teachers', and staff's attitudes and actions as well as school norms and policies; and
3. Schools as institutions should recognize and build on the social nature of human beings for self-organization, shared decision-making, and collective empowerment and responsibility (Power et al., 1989; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

There is now a body of research that persuasively demonstrates the transformative power of prosocial education interventions and approaches for turning the apathetic or truant student into a motivated learner and explorer and the okay and orderly school or underperforming school into a thriving learning community.

Prosocial education creates the structures of effective schools and positive school climates that, foster students' overall development as well as define the conditions upon which optimal learning depends. Warm, challenging, and individual relationships of each child with all of his or her teachers is the keystone provided by prosocial education efforts and interventions; it fulfills the purpose of education, making schools the gateway for every child and adolescent to take strong sure steps toward adulthood (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Evaluation research provides a growing body of evidence showing that many, but certainly not all, prosocial interventions enhance students' academic learning and achievement and their civic, moral, social, and emotional growth (Aber, Brown, Jones, Berg, & Torrente, 2011; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007).

For most educators and parents alike, the learning environment or the climate of the school is not recognized for its true importance. Frequently it is only recognized when something seems wrong and then we search for someone to blame -- we expel "bad" students or get rid of severely underperforming teachers. A poor school climate is often seen as a problem of

individual people rather than as the expression of structural issues regarding school organization and rules, how people are treated, and how child development is supported or undermined. From a structural viewpoint, issues such as conduct violations, poor adult role modeling for students and perspective-taking of student viewpoint, isolation and disempowerment of teachers, and championing curriculum over children are seen as piecemeal management issues. The "hidden" curriculum of school rules, classroom management, and teacher's disciplinary and reward practices undermine well meaning attempts to educate our children (Jackson 1968).

Prosocial education strategies should sensitize teacher to students' social as well as academic challenges. Thus, it not only should help teachers recognize and prevent conditions that allow fighting, truancy, vandalism, stealing, and other problems, it also should help them recognize the ways in which their school, student peers, and they, themselves, may not address or may even create the daily conditions that foster failures, chronic failure, and apathy (Aber, Brown, & Jones, 2003; Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994).

As would be expected, excellent schools choose to pay attention to their school's climate; and they expand the idea or role of teacher to include being a mentor, a facilitator and advocate among students, and a role model. They know that prosocial education efforts support and promote students' academic learning. What they sometimes don't realize is that their efforts to create excellence necessarily change the *hidden curriculum* of their schools and that they are actually practicing within the broad idea that we term prosocial education. Making the hidden curriculum explicit and then making it a force for positive schooling and student learning and development is the promise of prosocial education

<div align="center">The Current State of Affairs</div>

It is still the current state of affairs that most educators, whether in university schools of education or practicing in the classroom, do not recognize the nature of prosocial education, see the hidden curriculum, nor its relationship to intentional school climate and academic engagement of all students (Hoffman, 2009). For example:

- We often don't see that when we discipline, we are also teaching. We don't know that the teaching strategies we use in our math, literature, or literacy classes can also be the foundation for successful classroom management (Scheeler, 2008).
- We see the two sides of education as unrelated. Preservice and new teachers are taught classroom management techniques separated from child development. In

addition, educational training offers insufficient coursework on child development which gives at most a superficial understanding of children's naturally developing abilities as well as their differences.

- Teachers are rarely asked to think seriously about the relationships that necessarily exist between subject content, classroom management, and child development (Alvarez, 2007; Zeichner, 2010).

- Teachers and administrators are rarely exposed to a prosocial educational philosophy that focuses on relationships of trust and respect that are the basis for creating a supportive school environment that encourages openness and intellectual risk-taking and exploration of ideas through collaborative, active, and action-oriented learning.

- Often the stress that schools place on testing and grades, and just keeping order, thwart the impulses of children to develop socially and morally and the energy of teachers to support their growth.

The development of children's prosocial impulses needs support.

Whatever goes on in a classroom, whether it is a teacher lecturing to a room full of silent students or the controlled chaos of small group work, teaches students how to act as well as what to learn. Some children learn compliance or a sneaky kind of discretion; others learn they can think and share their ideas, debate with others, and make a mess doing artwork or a science experiment if it is all cleaned up by the end of class. Similarly, the climate in the halls, bathrooms, playground, and lunchroom of a school is determined by the quality of the second side of education in that school. Are students friendly, do they take each other's points of view? Or do they ignore, tease, and taunt, and even worse physically bully each other? Are most students bystanders to incidents of social and physical bullying? Does the school maintain order but feel more like a jail or does it create rules and systems that support positive norms of mutual respect and responsibility that are the foundation of warm and engaging relationships between teachers and students and a caring school community (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Noddings,1984). Students learn life's lessons in school, thus schooling—the processes and acts of teaching and learning, is at the interface of the two sides of the educational coin.

<u>Making the Case for the Importance of Prosocial Education</u>

Common sense and good educational practices confirm that if we have a class or school of students and educators that respect others, care for others, feel welcomed and supported, and

realize that basic tenets of behavior are expected and required, both students and educators will experience a much more positive learning environment. Prosocial education offers great promise in helping educators experience greater career satisfaction and effectiveness.

How Can Prosocial Education Help?

As Jonathan Cohen proposed in the *Harvard Educational Review* (2006), there should be an umbrella term that encompasses and defines the varied educational research and programmatic efforts that focus on youth development and social aspects of education. The efforts Cohen refers to encompass the twelve approaches for promoting and empowering prosocial education enumerated below.

Twelve Approaches for Promoting and Empowering Prosocial Education
1. Character Education
2. Civic Education
3. Moral Education
4. School Climate and Culture Improvement
5. Service Learning
6.   Social and Emotional Learning
7. Contemplative Education
8. Positive Youth Development
9. Early Childhood Education
10. After School Programs
11. Multi-Cultural Education
12. Teacher and Administrator Preparation Programs

These varied and sometimes disparate fields have shown evidence suggestive of impact on: a) stronger sense of school community and more positive school climate; b) enhanced teacher professionalism and effectiveness as mentors; c) increased academic and prosocial achievement; d) decreased academic, personal, and interpersonal risks and challenges; and e) improvements in encouraging civically engaged youth. A great amount of thoughtful arguments, theory, and empirical evidence exist in each of these fields supporting the idea that education and schooling can be radically improved when certain more positive social conditions exist. We call this umbrella *prosocial education*.

Unfortunately, within education we often hear that some educators believe they do not have time to implement prosocial education efforts because it will take time away from the curriculum efforts. When evidence exists that clearly shows that prosocial education actually complements curricula and contributes to increased achievement such an excuse seems void of logic. These two sides of the coin are indivisible for several reasons. Ask experienced successful educators and they will tell you that to be highly effective in teaching academics equal amounts of focus on student behavior, development, and socialization are required. The prosocial education side of this process is closely related to learning and is connected to the expectations associated with the taught curriculum, school rules for conduct, determination of status and compliance through grades and test scores, and other institutional systems of rewards and sanctions placed upon the students. Other aspects of socialization in schools also are implicit, unacknowledged, or hidden as well. For example:

1. How is the power relationship between teachers and students exercised once the classroom door is closed?
2. How does leadership by a school principal or teachers provide options for the school to create opportunities for student voice and leadership?
3. How does the instructional practice encourage or discourage critical thinking about issues that are central to the lives of children and the world?
4. Are anti-social behaviors such as bullying ignored or acknowledged as a threat to a caring school culture and effectively dealt with?
5. How much attention is paid to offering children the experiences and skills they need to form positive relationships and participate in democratic processes?

In many schools, the interest in what we are defining as prosocial education is limited to reducing behavioral challenges for special needs children and reducing discipline incidents. The potential of more robust support for prosocial behavior—a focus on broad developmental outcomes and helping a student fit socially within a school—is often unrecognized.

The two sides of the educational coin exist in a reciprocal relationship. Curricula and instructional practices affect students' prosocial development since behavior, and socialization are ongoing, dependent upon, and influenced by environmental forces experienced in school settings. On the other hand, the level and types of prosocial education infused can either hamper or promote academic development. Teaching from a prosocial perspective that focuses on better

augmenting behavior, development, and socialization can promote learning and more effective teaching methods. Prosocial education also can complement academic content choices by offering a clearer understanding of the developmental assets, budding capacities, and needs of students of different ages and developmental stages. Through a focus on these components, prosocial education optimizes learning.

In the business world, a good corporate executive, whose job security often mainly rests upon one number (e.g., total annual sales or net profit), knows that such a number rises and falls for many reasons—the economy, product life cycles, overhead costs. As a result, businesses focus on improving a host of such variables as employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction and service, product development, and other avenues needed to boost the bottom-line. Similarly, economists know that one number (e.g., national trade deficit, unemployment rate, jobs created) *cannot* reflect the complete state of our nation's economy. Therefore, they create an assortment of indexes made up of many variables that help to provide a more definitive picture. In 1993, James Guthrie at University of California-Berkeley asked, "Do America's schools need a 'Dow Jones Index'? The question was posed because education lacked a comprehensive and useful indicator of the state of education. Now is the time to acknowledge that, as with any complex system, no one indicator is sufficient to gain a true perspective on the functioning of a whole school or district—and especially on a student's outcome. Prosocial education can provide the additional variables needed to better determine educational success.

Building upon but yet moving beyond Eisenberg's (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989) work defining prosocial behavior, and the research demonstrating that prosociality impacts academic achievement (Capara, *Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo*, 2000), prosocial education augments education by helping students develop and nurture voluntary empathic behavior that benefits others as well as themselves, and increase their interpersonal skills in the context of core ethical values of responsibility, caring, and relational trust. Prosocial educators understand that 1) children develop whether we like it or not; 2) children develop in contexts and relationships which have the power to shape or foster learning; and 3) development and learning cannot be divorced just as academics and prosocial education cannot be divorced.

Most educators we work with believe that *IF* the adults in a school routinely show respect for each other professionally and care about one another personally, enjoy solving pedagogical, ethical, and logistical problems collaboratively, *THEN* the school would be a positive, productive

work environment in which to meet children's academic and developmental needs. Likewise, *IF* you have a classroom of honest students who care about others, understand responsibility, and practice respect *THEN* the classroom would become a much more productive and vibrant place to learn and work. It also seems logical that if the school climate and work environment was a more conducive place for learning and supportive atmosphere for prosocial behavior, then many more students and educators would enjoy walking through school doors in the morning. And, just maybe, if such aspects of schooling could be improved, academic achievement scores would increase in the process.

The body of prosocial education research is focused on: 1) the developmental needs of students; and 2) the needs of educators and school systems to make the climate and culture conducive to student learning and growth. It is necessary to recognize prosocial education as real education—preparing students for the tests of life, rather than for a life of tests. Schools' attempts to meet this challenge cannot be successful if there is no real place in education to teach life skills, when education is conceived narrowly as only a place of academic learning. Focusing on life skills means helping students think about what they want to achieve in life, helping them think about graduating from high school, what they want after graduation, and how they want to live as adults. Prosocial education provides opportunities for students to develop their own life goals in the context of genuinely challenging activities in a supportive atmosphere that exposes them to a wide range of occupations and promotes self-exploration and understanding others by learning and working with them.

In 2009, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified school connectedness—the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals—as an important protective factor that discourages a range of high risk behaviors among youth, such as drug use, gang involvement, and early sexual activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). The CDC school connectedness initiative identifies six prosocial strategies that parents, teachers, and school staff can use to foster social learning environments that facilitate healthy development as well as discourage high-risk behavior:

1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement, academic achievement, and staff empowerment.

2. Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.

3. Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.

4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.

5. Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.

6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

The CDC initiative also notes the research indicating that students who feel connected to their school are also more likely to have better academic achievement, including higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and stay in school longer (CDC, 2009).

In 1995, with support from the Department of Health and Human Services, the University of California, Los Angeles, established the Center for Mental Health in Schools as part of the federal mental health in schools program. The center has developed a conceptual framework of student learning supports designed to address barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engagement of disconnected students (Adelman & Taylor, 2010a). The fundamental principles of this approach are consistent with prosocial education.:

1. *enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning*

2. *supporting transitions*

3. *increasing home and school connections*

4. *responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*

5. *increasing community involvement and support*

6. *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.* (Adelman & Taylor, 2010b, p. 3)

Other Educational Leadership and Innovation Organizations Support Prosocial Education

ASCD is one of the premier practitioner-oriented educational publishing and professional development organizations in the U.S. and internationally. Its primary members are educational

supervisors, administrators and curriculum developers, university faculty and deans, along with significant numbers of teachers and school support personnel. The five tenets of its *Whole Child Initiative* are consistent with the broad view of educational purpose of prosocial education.

1. Each student enters school *healthy* and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
2. Each student learns in an intellectually challenging environment that is physically and emotionally *safe* for students and adults.
3. Each student is actively *engaged* in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
4. Each student has access to personalized learning and is *supported* by qualified, caring adults.
5. Each graduate is *challenged* academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment in a global environment. (The Whole Child, n.d., para. 3)

One of the organizations that has taken on the challenge of assisting schools to use digital technology in the service of educational goals is The George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF) and its implementation wing, *Edutopia* focus on uses of information technology as transformative processes in a way that signals an understanding of prosocial values, content, and skills. Students must be able to:

... work cooperatively and constructively with others; use their strengths and talents to become empowered, productive citizens in our democratic society and the world at large. (The George Lucas Education Foundation, n.d., para. 2)

The more caring, supportive, challenging, healthy, and engaging the environments kids are in, the more they will thrive. The more they aspire to have lives with positive purpose, the more they will want to learn and excel. Opportunity to advance leads to growth. By highlighting the formative role of emotion and supportive relationships, the integrating role of character formation, the actualizing role of skill development, and the sustaining role of social context, all within a developmentally continuous frame, prosocial education provides the glue that allows for a synergistic joining of related educational policy streams that have been flowing in our schools and communities unchanneled. The following are two principles of prosocial education that may be persuasive to even hard-core members of the teach and test club.

Academic Learning and Performance Are Linked to Prosocial Education Practices

Dewey's holistic, constructivist, and action oriented view of learning has been cited by a number of authors in this volume as an inspirational influence. The field of confluent education believes that content knowledge is the organizing factor in learning. "Confluence" involves the application of reflection, inquiry, introspection, physically active learning, and mind-body awareness to lessons in each discipline (Hackbarth, 1997). Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences theory similarly advocates multichannel learning, speaking particularly to the importance of noncognitive modalities and both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors for many learners. Moral and character education (Noddings, 2002; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) raises awareness that educators must be concerned with the creation of a caring environment as well as with the congruence of learning and the learner's perception of himself or herself. Caring implies the competence to make a difference in someone else's life: "It is the strong, resilient backbone of human life" (Noddings 2002, p.101). And incongruent material has a low likelihood of retention and generalization. Goleman's (2006) popularization of emotional intelligence began to put a long-overdue spotlight on the pervasive role of emotion on how and what students learn, influencing attention, focus, and retention. Recently, Davidson (2007) provided initial evidence, from imaging studies, that some prosocial education programs sustain their effects in individuals by producing changes in brain structure and functioning. Memory is impaired by high degrees of anxiety and stress, and learning is enhanced by calmness and cooperation.

The very nature of school-based learning is relational, and social and emotional skills are essential for building and sustaining learning relationships of the kind needed for academic success, citizenship, a civilized and nonviolent classroom, and effective inclusive education. Although hinted at in writings about democratic schools (Apple & Beane, 1995), current thinking with regard to 21st-century schools and civic involvement identifies social-emotional competencies and character and ethical education (Berman & McCarthy, 2006; Truesdale, 2008; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007) as the foundation of democratic participation and engaged citizenship. The development of these skills and values begins within schools as arenas for student participation and leadership. How are students helped to understand their role as "citizens" of their school? What allows children to see that school has relevance and importance to their everyday lives and that they are important to the school?

Prosocial skills are vital for children to have in order to grow up with the confidence and competencies needed to participate effectively in a global and highly politicized world, where being part of the mechanisms of democracy, community life, family, and workplaces is going to be challenging. Identifying "the missing piece" of prosocial education may create a challenge, but it also outlines a path. The evidence from theory, research, and practice is growing that education at all levels—preschool through college—must focus explicitly on the integration of social, emotional, moral, and academic learning as part of the process of preparing, humanizing, and educating students.

Prosocial education is and should be considered as an essential cornerstone of genuine progress in the education field and essential for enduring school reform.

Why is it helpful to use the term prosocial education? Developing and using a shared language across the wide range of prosocial education interventions can serve policymakers from the local to federal level to create and tune educational policies that ensure the learning of every child and their development into productive and critically active citizens. By making science, technology, engineering, and mathematics the STEM sciences, educators have been able to leverage their concern, magnify their voices, and directly influence educational policy (Kuenzi, 2008). There is a clear and feasible potential for the term, "prosocial education" to become the "stem" science that promotes student social, personal, civic, moral, and character development and the conditions of schools that nurture them. Wide-spread problems including delayed graduation, truancy, and cheating by both students and educators and stories of feeling invisible told daily by hundreds of thousands of our children have begun to sink into our national psyche. Prosocial education can be the policy lever for this positive change as its principles and varied practices distinctly articulate ideal relationships between academic learning and development and the processes that promote both.

> **Note: All references are from: Brown, P.M., Corrigan, M.W., &
> D'Alessandro, A. (Eds.) (2012).** ***The Handbook of Prosocial Education.***
> **Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.**