

Prosocial Education

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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, 1. that children learn and become critically knowledgeable and 2. that they develop into mature, productive, and ethical citizens—this second goal is the goal of what we call prosocial education. Children develop prosocially 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 prosocial development of some children as well. While all these environments and experiences are important for the full development of children, for most organized societies in the 21st century schools are the primary place for the prosocialization of children. Families socialize children, but 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. The ways in which children make friends, learn to work with others—both adults and peers, and begin to know about themselves both naturally develop and must be taught. Both the development and the teaching of these prosocial attitudes and skills takes place in schools; schools are the practice ground for prosocial development and education. It is our belief that schools should be communities of meaning and of trusting relationships in which each person, student and all adults alike, is respected, cared for, and responsible to the whole; and the structures of education (rules, policies, routines of the school day and classroom) are organized to optimize learning and positive relationships to truly facilitate the development of the whole child.

Prosocial education is intrinsically valuable because it creates a positive learning and living environment and promotes the healthy development of students. At the same time, as research demonstrates over and over again, prosocial education is instrumentally valuable by maximizing the effects of efforts to increase academic achievement and accountability. Thus, prosocial education refocuses the educational vision on the development of the whole child in the contexts of healthy schools.