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## Prosociality as a pedagogical challenge

### Prospołeczność jako wyzwanie pedagogiczne

#### Abstract

**Introduction.** The material presented here is an attempt to indicate the meaning and the role of prosociality in individual biographies, but it also captures the problem in a much broader social dimension. The subjective review of concepts and approaches conducted allows us to treat prosociality as an essential topic of scientific discourse while seeing it as a challenge for pedagogical practice, with particular attention to the responsibilities of key educational environments – family and school.

**Aim.** The purpose of this inquiry is to draw attention to the need for forming pro-social attitudes, as well as opportunities for specific educational environments in this process. Emphasizing the positive effects of pro-sociality and the possible negative consequences of its absence, an attempt was made to justify its impact on human (co) existence.

**Materials and methods.** The text is an overview, based on reference analysis.

**Results.** The presented material allowed us to demonstrate the importance and benefits of prosociality both for the functioning of the individual and for societies. Also, it indicates the important role of the family and school environment in building and promoting pro-social attitudes.

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**Keywords:** prosociality, kindness, school, upbringing, education.

### **Abstrakt**

**Wprowadzenie.** Prezentowany materiał stanowi próbę wskazania znaczenia i roli prospołeczności dla indywidualnych biografii, ale także ujmuje ten problem w znacznie szerszym, społecznym, wymiarze. Dokonany subiektywny przegląd koncepcji i podejść pozwala traktować prospołeczność jako ważny temat naukowego dyskursu, jednocześnie czyniąc zeń swoiste wyzwanie dla praktyki pedagogicznej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem odpowiedzialności kluczowych środowisk wychowawczych – rodziny i szkoły.

**Cel.** Celem niniejszego opracowania jest zwrócenie uwagi na potrzebę kształtowania prospołecznych postaw oraz na miejsce i możliwości określonych środowisk wychowawczych w tym procesie. Podkreślając pozytywne skutki prospołeczności oraz możliwe negatywne konsekwencje jej braku, starano się uzasadnić jej wpływ na kształt i obraz ludzkiej (ko)egzystencji.

**Materiały i metody.** Tekst ma charakter teoretyczny, poglądowy, oparty jest na analizie źródłowej.

**Wyniki.** Zaprezentowany materiał pozwolił na wykazanie znaczenia i korzyści prospołeczności dla funkcjonowania zarówno jednostki, jak i całych społeczeństw. Wskazano także na istotną rolę środowiska rodzinnego i szkolnego w budowaniu i promowaniu prospołecznych postaw.

**Słowa kluczowe:** prospołeczność, życzliwość, szkoła, wychowanie, edukacja.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary reality creates many challenges. The times in which we live make us reflect on the human condition, society and the world, on our values, attitudes, and goals. When we make choices, are we guided by a selfish or rather pro-social morality? What is important to us – our own good, the good of others, or the good of the community?

It seems that one measure to assess the quality of a society is the prosociality of its citizens. This term encompasses the knowledge, attitude, and willingness to act for the benefit of others or, as some point out, to reckon with the good of others in one's behaviour (Wojciszke, 2017; Kiciński, Kurczewski, 1977). Concern for the good of others can be allocentric (the good of the individual) or sociocentric (the common good), but always requires getting rid of thinking in terms of "me" and my benefit, in favour of non-personal, often altruistic motivations based on empathy. To shape and strengthen pro-social attitudes and a real commitment to society, it seems necessary to internalise pro-social values, i.e., values that are particularly associated with going beyond one's interest, which are, according to Shalom Schwartz (1992), universalism and benevolence.

**Between purpose and effect. Individual or societal benefit – an (un)necessary choice?**

Surveys of Polish society reveal that, although we declaratively treat pro-sociality as something desirable and expected, in practice we are closer to individualistic goals and selfish motivations (Marianński, 2014). These apparent tendencies are of concern not only from an ethical point of view but also because of the irrationality of such choices. We live immersed in interpersonal spaces, in real or virtual relationships with others, but never separately. We are a social species. The support and proximity of others are not only essential for our survival but also help us to function optimally. According to Social Baseline Theory (SBT) (Beckes, Coan, 2011), the presence of others (even strangers) reduces energy costs (triggers a weaker brain response to threats) compared to when we are forced to cope alone. Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, dissect the common, but in their view, an erroneous interpretation of Darwin's theory suggests that, from an evolutionary point of view, the most advantageous survival strategy is a sense of connectedness and friendship. Here, they point not to intelligence but to the development of social competencies such as benevolence, tolerance, or the ability to cooperate as the essential adaptive factor (Hare, Woods, 2022). The sociobiological perspective itself, which goes beyond the humanistic duty and ethical imperative to care for others, suggests the benefits of our "group" nature, pointing to the functional utility of pro-social attitudes, both for the individual and the community as a whole.

From an individual perspective, several studies provide evidence that engaging in more prosocial activities promotes improved well-being and has a whole range of other benefits (Davidson, Begley, 2012). Pro-social behaviour contributes to well-being by satisfying an individual's needs such as a sense of competence, autonomy, and connection to others (Deci, Ryan, 2000). Positive outcomes also include increased levels of happiness (Brown, Kasser, 2005), self-confidence (Martela, Ryan, 2015), and improved quality of social relationships (Layous et al., 2012). In the model of helping as a coping strategy, Elizabeth Midlarsky (1991) identifies five mechanisms that make pro-social behaviour bring specific benefits to the helper: it increases self-esteem and sense of competence, distracts from one's problems and stress, helps to realise the meaning and value of life, lifts mood, and facilitates social integration.

Similarly, the Response Shift Theory assumes that the process of engaging in prosocial behaviour facilitates psychological adaptation by changing internal standards, values, and conceptualisations of well-being. Acting for the benefit of others also helps to divert attention from one's psychological problems, such as anxiety or depression (Howard et al., 2011). Also, Deborah Danner, Wallace Friesen, and Adah

Carter (2007) present a model connecting pro-social behaviour to better mental health (improved well-being, positive affect) and physical health (strengthening the cardiovascular system and the physiological immune response, promoting longevity and slowing the ageing process) (Danner, Friesen, & Carter, 2007; Le Nguyen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the Negative-state Relief Model indicates that helping others reduces negative emotions (Cialdini, Baumann, & Kenrick, 1981), while the Theory of Warm-Glow Giving (Andreoni, 1989) draws attention to the experienced joy and satisfaction of doing good for others.

As some studies demonstrate, practising kind actions increases personal happiness. Other research reveals that happy people are more pro-social. As Lara Aknin and colleagues (2012) suggest, one triggers the other, creating a self-perpetuating mechanism that builds a friendly social climate (cf. Hill, Delpriore, & Major, 2013). The results confirm the positive feedback theory – cooperative behaviour spreads through social networks, and people who receive help from strangers are more likely to help others in the future. These effects may stem from feelings of gratitude and reciprocity (Bartlett, DeSteno, 2006) and elevation, an emotion triggered by watching someone else perform acts of kindness (Algoe, Haidt, 2009). Both gratitude and elevation have also been shown to lead to increases in altruistic behaviour in both adults and children (Tian, Chu, & Huebner, 2016), and developing kind attitudes at school age results in improved life satisfaction and peer relationships (Layous et al., 2012).

Behavioural manifestations of prosociality include social inclusion, complimenting, forgiveness, respect, honesty, proactive support, and positive social attitude. Children tend to equate it with sharing, helping, and comforting (Dunfield, 2014; Binfet, Gaertner, 2015). These are both defining markers of prosociality and an area for development in pedagogical work. Interestingly, it appears that “cognitive” prosocial interventions can be just as effective as behavioural ones. However, to refer back to previous benevolent experiences, to be able to interpret and evaluate them properly, we need to have experienced them beforehand.

While indicating the benefits of adopting pro-social attitudes, the negative consequences that individuals will suffer as a result of failing to do so seem obvious. Indeed, a lack of pro-sociality has far-reaching social consequences.

The concentration of the participants of social life on the individual-personal and intrapersonal sphere, with the simultaneous diminution of obligations of a non-personal nature, threatens to disintegrate social bonds [...]. In Polish society after 1989, the proportions between concern for one’s well-being (individual values, sometimes of an egoistic nature) and the well-being of other people (pro-social values) have been disturbed (Mariański, 2014, p. 103).

Also today, at the level of general life orientations, egoistic values are more widespread than pro-social values, with the latter occupying a distant place in the declared hierarchies (e.g., Mariański, 2014). This situation poses a danger because, as Stanisław Ossowski argues, agreeing to prioritise the interests of the group over one's interests is an important premise of social bonding (Mariański, 2014, p. 103); in its absence, social cohesion, co-responsibility, and caring are difficult to achieve.

A society composed of people focused on private interest, unwilling to pursue non-personal goals, cannot become a society that is cohesive and responsible for the common good; rather, it will become a society of people who are strangers to each other, individuals in competition with each other, unable to build moral order and social capital based largely on trust (Mariański, 2014, p. 107).

In Social Bond Theory, trust refers to attitudes of reliance on interaction partners, the assumption that regardless of circumstances they will not betray shared values, and principles relating to the good of the wider collective. In Robert Putnam's (2008) concept of social capital, on the other hand, trust functions as a fundamental indicator of social relations, dispositions that characterise not individuals, but the entire human collective, group, and local community, including the civic community (cf. Bartoszek, 2003). According to this concept, social relations and networks between individuals are a resource through which various benefits can be achieved – in private, social, and professional life. Putnam, in defining the concept of social capital, considers it in terms of trust, shared norms, and values, increasing the efficiency of actions. He also demonstrates that in a community where spontaneous cooperation is present, coordination of activities is better and easier. Trust as a collective virtue therefore increases the capacity for cooperation and the chance of achieving community benefits. In building a society of committed and caring people, it is also worth placing benevolence as a foundation for relationships, which for many thinkers is synonymous with, or at least a prerequisite for, pro-social attitudes. In his work, *A theory of justice*, John Rawls emphasises that benevolence is, or should be, a kind of duty serving the development of individuals and whole societies, constituting the essence of our friendly coexistence. Drawing a bleak vision of interpersonal relations devoid of benevolence, the researcher prompts us to consider “what society would be if it were common knowledge that this duty had been rejected” (Rawls, 1971, p. 339). For prosociality leads

[...] to social integration and the growth of the communal dimension of social life, while egocentrism contributes to the destruction of the awareness of the sense of community, consequently giving rise to aggression and social pathology. Pro-sociality and egocentrism, as two forms of social involvement, are conditioned in many ways [...] however, they always constitute an important factor of the axiological orientation of society, determining also the perspectives of its future fate (Świątkiewicz, 2005, p. 190).

Initiating and maintaining kind social relationships is an important factor in shaping prosociality (Binfet, Gaertner, 2015). Awareness of the complex interactions between mentalizing skills, benevolence, and social contexts is in line with the idea that empathy and taking the perspective of others are important developmental antecedents of prosociality (Sahdra et al., 2015). According to research, prosociality becomes more selective with age. Positive mood states facilitate kind actions, whereas negative mood states may hinder them, as paying attention to other people's emotions is weaker when negative affect is experienced (the focus on oneself is then exaggerated). The quality of the relationship between the actors involved and their past experiences is also important. In relationships with a negative past, feelings of gratitude and reciprocity may therefore be insufficient, creating a potential barrier to future expressions of kindness, hence the importance of building conditions that foster positive social relationships.

To counteract negative tendencies and create a more empathetic, community-based, civic society, the answer to the question: "Do I care and am I willing to get involved?" seems crucial. How one answers this question not only defines us as individuals but also has the potential to define our societies. The question of caring and commitment is essentially a question about what we protect and nurture and what is important to us; it is a question about values and our attitudes towards other people (e.g., Tronto, 1994). Whether a young person responds affirmatively to the question posed or remains indifferent to the world around them and to the needs of others, depends to a large extent on the formative influence of educational processes and socialisation environments.

### **Shaping pro-social attitudes – the responsibility of educational environments**

The impulse to consider pro-sociality in a pedagogical context came from, among others, the works of Polish philosophers who connected it with benevolence – a specific attitude or desirable and cultivated moral virtue. For example, Witold Rubczyński defined benevolence as an active, disinterested, unconditional attitude that harmonises human feelings, making it a condition of community and interpersonal solidarity. Czesław Znamierowski, defining common benevolence, treated it as a foundation, an overriding moral norm refraining from harming others and motivating people to act good to them. Tadeusz Kotarbiński, in his concept of the caring carer, drew attention to the active readiness to help the suffering and the wronged, while for Henryk Elzenberg, benevolence is goodwill, from which flows ethical will and virtue, whose manifestations are valuable acts (Barański, 2019). These positions are united by the conviction that benevolent attitudes not so much can but should be shaped. In such an understanding, prosociality becomes an important element of moral teaching, educational, and upbringing work, which is responsible not only for individual biographies but also for the shape and coexistence of society as a whole. Inspired by Polish ethical thought, we can see that prosociality appears as a pedagogical challenge, related not so much to the knowledge of benevolence but to the responsibility of guardians, parents, and teachers for the formation of certain attitudes or desired virtues and values.

Clearly, for many of us, the journey towards prosociality usually begins in the family home, with our first relationship with a caregiver. Research indicates that a disturbed attachment relationship during childhood results in lower scores on various measures of prosociality in adulthood. Children with a disturbed attachment pattern manifest a lower tendency to take the perspective of the person in distress, a lower ability to share the feelings of others, a lower sense of community with others, and a lower willingness to take responsibility for their well-being. They are also less oriented towards helping others, less cooperative and comforting, and less sensitive to moral transgressions that may cause harm to other people<sup>1</sup>. Similar trends apply to adolescents with inappropriate attachment patterns. Disturbed bonds and insecurity are associated with less volunteer-

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, we can also mention: less willingness to take the perspective of the person in distress (Corcoran, Mallinckrodt, 2000), less ability to share another person's feelings (Trusty, Ng, & Watts, 2005), less sense of community with others and less willingness to take responsibility for the well-being of others (Zuroff, Moskowitz, & Côté, 1999), less willingness to be cooperative and other-oriented (De Dreu, 2012; Hawley, Shorey, & Alderman, 2009), and to be sensitive to moral transgressions that may harm other people (Albert, Horowitz, 2009).

ing and less involvement for altruistic reasons (Priel, Mitrany, & Shahar, 1998; McKinney, 2002). The patterns formed in childhood and perpetuated in later life, and consequently, certain attitudes, call for special attention to the role and causal power of the educational environment in this process. This is all the more so since research results suggest that the influence of caregivers in building pro-social attitudes goes far beyond early childhood (e.g., Cotney, Banerjee, 2019). The modelling process and the quality of relationships also leave their imprint on the individual's later functioning. The patterns we pass on will have effects in the future. If they are good, we can count on shaping happier, more empathetic and open people, ready to help others, co-responsible, caring and committed; if bad, self-centred and indifferent to others, selfish. The choice, although, as daily practice shows, is not easy or even unattainable for some, seems obvious and worthy of deeper reflection.

Alongside the family, the environment that can help shape and reinforce pro-social attitudes and values is undoubtedly the school. Teachers usually approach this issue in the broader context of shaping citizenship and social engagement (*Greater Good in Action*, 2014; Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, October 3, 2023). The interest in fostering pro-social behaviour in students, such as kindness, stems from findings in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) that support the health, social and educational benefits of interventions designed to enhance students' social and emotional competence (Binfet, Passmore, 2019). Nurturing social and emotional competence in childhood has been found to have long-term developmental consequences, and has recently been shown to also predict an individual's social functioning and well-being in adolescence as well as adulthood (prevention of delinquency, addiction) (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Considering the individual and societal benefits, we see that learning SEL should become an important part of school practice. Through SEL, "we learn to recognise and manage emotions, care for others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, establish positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviours" (Zins et al., 2004, p. 4). Social-emotional competence is broadly defined as a set of skills that enables individuals to regulate emotions, maintain positive relationships, and engage in effective goal-setting (Miller, 2015; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissboard, 2013). Promoting and enhancing SEL is exceptionally important, as inadequate levels of social and emotional functioning are increasingly recognised as a major factor in many public health problems, such as substance abuse, obesity, and violence (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015).

Despite much evidence of the social and individual benefits of pro-sociality, formal education is still an underestimated area of school responsibility. Similar

deficits are presented by the school's everyday life, related not so much to the formal curriculum, but to the climate of the place where the formative process is constantly underway. This is all the more surprising, as research demonstrates that a positive school climate is associated with positive health outcomes, increased self-esteem, stronger motivation to learn, less violence, reduced student absenteeism, and mitigates the impact of socio-economic risk on academic performance (Thapa et al., 2013). Beneficial outcomes also include a sense of safety, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, reduced misbehaviour, increased educational success, control of emotions and behaviour, teaching that is engaging and conducive to learning, and an overall improvement in the quality of school functioning (Binfet, Gadermann, & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Meanwhile, some research reports have found that low school climate scores are associated with a range of disadvantages, including increased relational aggression, poor classroom behaviour, and lower academic achievement (Aldridge, Ala'I, 2013).

A review of the literature and everyday practice allows us to assume that, on the one hand, promoting a positive school climate can promote prosociality (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Furlong, 2014) and learning (Cohen et al., 2009); on the other hand, it is prosociality that shapes the positive climate of an institution (Aldridge, Ala'I, 2013; Cohen et al., 2009). School climate is based on accepted and supported norms, values, and expectations that collectively reflect the quality of school life. Assuming that a particular school climate creates the conditions for student development and achievement, the direction seems clear. Pedagogical concern based on the promotion of pro-social attitudes should be an important part of every teacher's educational policy and professional responsibility (Hamre, Pianta, 2006).

As Patricia Jennings and Mark Greenberg (2009) suggest, it is the example of teachers that is an important factor in modelling pro-social attitudes. Bridget Hamre and Robert Pianta (2006) argue that there are crucial teacher behaviours that contribute to building close bonds between teachers and students. These include: (1) teaching about social and emotional development; (2) participating in social conversations with students (e.g., asking about life outside the classroom, passions, and interests); (3) making the teacher more accessible; (4) valuing students' points of view and ideas (e.g., expressing appreciation for students' ideas during discussions); and (5) using behaviour management strategies that communicate clear behavioural norms and expectations (e.g., responding fairly to students' misbehaviour, being supportive). A benevolent relationship between teachers and students not only influences the atmosphere of the institution itself, but also underpins a sense of belonging and community, motivation and school engagement, which in turn influence students' intellectual development, educational attainment,

and SEL (including students' prosociality) (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissboard, 2013; Jennings, Greenberg, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

By creating a pro-social climate, a friendly, supportive atmosphere where children and young people can co-create, experience and learn from positive role models, the school provides an opportunity to shape happier, more engaged and empathetic individuals and communities. Unfortunately, Polish schools have much to improve in doing this. As shown in a study conducted by the Department of Education in Poznań in 2021 on a sample of around 1,000 students, it is the area of teacher-student relationships that respondents believe needs fundamental change towards a more empathetic and subjective approach (Cytlak et al., 2022). As in the case of the family environment, the educational environment has the opportunity to influence the development of its students and the image of society they will form. It is worth using this opportunity because, unfortunately, as J. Mariański suggests when discussing research on the pro-sociality of Poles, while in Poland before 1989 distrust and lack of concern in interpersonal relations was to some extent of a "forced" character, today it takes on the characteristics of a "chosen" attitude to life (Mariański, 2014, p. 110). This not only causes a lot of concern about the state of Polish society today but also makes us pessimistic about the future. The values we profess and the attitudes we display say a great deal and become a testimony to the time and place, to the quality of power, values, upbringing, education, social relations, citizenship, and many others. However, the hope remains that the education and upbringing communities will do their homework on pro-sociality, forming indifferent, and caring people who form a community that cares for itself, others and the world.

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