



Can prosocial behaviour, attitudes and aspirations be fostered by sustained exposure to the portrayal of human nature as innately altruistic?

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Introduction

This research sought to explore the connection between children's beliefs about human nature, and their involvement in prosocial behaviour.

Following the work of Zhuojun Yao and Robert Enright, which highlighted a correlation between belief in human nature as altruistic and prosocial behaviour, this study investigates how these beliefs can be developed through education whereby changes in children's perspectives lead to prosocial self-efficacy, and in turn, prosocial behaviour.

Objectives

This research originally aimed to monitor shifts in individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour as a means of investigating whether sustained exposure to positive messages about human nature can be implemented as a method to encourage prosocial tendencies. However, unanticipated constraints, including a significantly shortened timeframe (from 3-4 weeks to just 7 days) and the absence of a participating control group, necessitated adjustments to the objectives.

Measuring changes in students' attitudes or behaviour over such a brief period proved unfeasible. Consequently, the objectives evolved to focus on evaluating the efficacy of the resources designed to convey positive ideas about human nature to students. While this shift limited the scope, it paves the way for future studies and offers valuable insights into potential avenues for fostering positive change.

Methodology

The research process encompassed communication with the school, negotiation of a condensed time frame, administration of questionnaires to students, parents, and teachers, execution of multiple research sessions, resource adaptation to accommodate for time limitations, and supplementary data collection through interviews, conversations and worksheets from tasks.

The intervention class was made up of 32 year five students. To help ensure internal validity, it was intended that a corresponding control group, made up of 30 students of the same year group, would also take part in answering questionnaires. However, some complications arose which prevented a second set of questionnaires from being completed by the control group. Sadly, this led to a reliability concern regarding the data collected from questionnaires and thus they have not been included here. Parents of the classes were also asked to participate by filling in two sets of questions, pre- and post-research. A total of 28 of the first set were handed in (both classes) and 15 of the second set (intervention class only).

Conclusion

The literature referenced in the introduction sheds light on the intricate connection between optimistic beliefs about human nature, particularly the belief in innate human altruism, and the profound influence of these convictions on an individual's personal prosocial attitudes and, by extension, their corresponding behaviours. This research set out to test means of cultivating prosocial behaviour within an educational context designed to nurture these attitudes and beliefs.

While 11 out of 15 parents reported that their child appeared more positive/optimistic, the study fell short of fully demonstrating the potential of these efforts, with only 5 out of 15 reporting a change in the behaviour of their child. Regrettably, the limitations imposed by the sample size, timeframe, and the absence of a control group hampered the precision and any possible generalisability of the findings. Consequently, this research alone cannot conclusively unveil the true extent of these methods and pathways for fostering prosocial self-efficacy and behavioural inclinations.

However, concerning the original research objectives, this small-scale inquiry did yield valuable insights, hinting at promising avenues that warrant further investigation.

Conversations with students further illuminated that learning about individuals who contribute positively to society can be inspirational, fostering a sense of self-efficacy even in children who stressed their awareness of the severity of challenges we face. Similarly, the discovery that others are effecting positive change appeared to kindle a sense of hopefulness in some children, igniting positive aspirations and, in some instances, a heightened sense of responsibility to make a difference.

This implies that the realisation that others are actively engaged in bettering the world may instil a sense of duty and responsibility among individuals to join these collective efforts, even if this wasn't an initial aspiration or intent. It suggests that the actions of others can motivate individuals to become part of a collective striving for change, once a picture of such a collective has been painted. Consequently, promoting awareness of these positive endeavours could serve as a catalyst for nurturing this sense of responsibility and duty, ultimately fostering prosocial behaviour.

This research underscores the significance of clear strategies and approaches aimed at fostering prosocial attitudes, not merely within young individuals, but in, and for, society as a whole. The study has initiated the development and testing of methods by which these concepts could be integrated into educational curricula, offering the potential to encourage prosocial dispositions in future generations.

In a different vein, it was impossible to overlook the resounding reality of the profound levels of concern and anxiety harboured by children in relation to the environment and climate change, which was fiercely emphasised throughout this research. Results constantly revealed their persistent and genuine apprehension about the state of the world and its future. Their concern serves to emphasise just how crucial it is that we work to encourage an adoption of prosocial aspirations and behaviour, with this process of course requiring that we first determine the means most apt to achieve this goal.

Conclusively, this research aimed not only to explore the intricate interplay between children's altruistic beliefs and their engagement in prosocial behaviour, but also to encourage the latter by presenting a positive narrative surrounding human beings and our nature. Despite the challenges faced during implementation, the study reveals valuable insights into the potential for nurturing prosocial values within educational contexts. The resources developed show promise, especially when paying attention to the engagement of students, the feedback they offered, and the conversations they have participated in throughout the research and within interviews. The quantitative findings, while not fully reliable in the current study, could gain more significance with adjustments in research conditions and timeframe. The broader implications extend to education, policy, and the fostering of prosocial attitudes.

Findings and discussion

The results presented primarily consist of qualitative data, influenced by considerations of reliability such as sample size, time constraints, and the absence of a control group. This data includes selected segments from interviews, key moments from specific tasks, original student contributions, some interesting additional findings, and parental responses relating to the original objectives. While questionnaires are referenced, their results are not included due to the aforementioned limitations.

A focus on empathy

Empathy is not only a significant prosocial trait that was important to highlight for students, but these tasks were also designed to address the fact that people sometimes exhibit negative behaviour. This focus differed from the usual subject matter which centred on positive contributions made by people. The aim was to encourage students to understand that the challenges people encounter in life often play a significant role in their unkind or antisocial behaviour.

Through storytelling

This task involved reading a story featuring Josie, whose morning included shouting at teachers, slamming doors, and getting into trouble. Children were asked to share their opinions of Josie; they mostly expressed negative views, using terms like 'rude' and 'ungrateful.' Notably, 20% of students immediately considered alternative explanations for her behaviour.

Subsequently, the same story was revisited with added context about Josie's environment, thoughts and emotions. These inclusions gave insight as to why Josie was behaving in this way. This resulted in a shift from 80% to just 13% of students holding a negative view of Josie.

Students engaged in meaningful discussions, revealing their relatability to Josie's experiences. Teachers expressed their intention to use this task, and during interviews, students referred to it positively. These outcomes demonstrate the task's effectiveness in fostering empathy and understanding.

Through learning about an empathetic charity

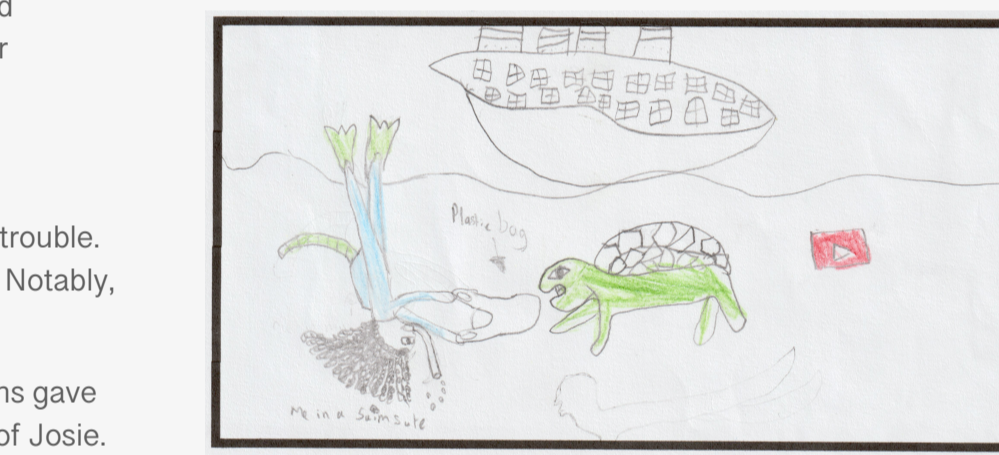
'Freedom Reads', a charity founded by Reginald Dwayne Betts, is dedicated to establishing libraries within correctional facilities, premised on the notion that reading serves as a source of inspiration and affords individuals the capacity to envision new possibilities for their lives.

The class engaged in a discussion concerning the substantial role that luck and chance play in the trajectories of all individuals, underlining the significance of extending empathy and forgiveness to those facing adversity. Students were tasked with devising proposals for items or resources they would choose to introduce within a prison environment, with the intention of affording individuals a second chance and an opportunity to imagine a positive future.

The motivation behind this task was to prompt a critical examination of the prevailing stereotypes and preconceived notions associated with the term 'prisoner.' The overarching objective was to underscore the perspective that individuals should not be categorically labelled as 'bad people,' but rather, actions deemed negative can arise from a multitude of complex factors. Examples here show the thoughtfulness and engagement of students.

Casting Light on Profound Environmental Concerns

As evident from these examples, a substantial portion of students articulated significant concerns regarding the planet and the environment in their work. The research findings revealed that all students had environmental concerns and shared a collective unease about the state of the world. It is evident that even students of this age possess a profound understanding of the gravity of the issues confronting our world, and they harbour genuine apprehensions about these challenges.



"I would help the turtles by deep sea diving for plastic in the different seas one by one with a group of experienced divers. I would start from the smallest ocean to the largest."

"Lots of people are trying to [help the environment] but governments haven't been listening. It is possible to make this change but people are just lazy to speak out about it."

"It is possible to help start a better environment but it is hard to do because you can't pick up every bit of litter in the world. We can still pick up the rubbish in our area to try and help..."



"I would change the climate change because it's getting worse and worse."

"The climate is really important because we have to have a nice environment so animals don't choke on plastic"

"The environment is important because we need to breathe and if we can't breathe we will die."

Increased prosocial aspirations and attitudes

"I wanted to ask whether or not you've enjoyed doing the stuff that we've been doing in class? You can be super honest! Have you been enjoying it?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Why have you been enjoying it? What has it made you think about?"

"It's made me think more about... because... sometimes people think that 'not many people are like helping the earth so why should I do it?' But then once you actually learn about how millions of people are actually trying to help, it feels like you want to be part of it."

"How about you?"

"For the empathy story, when you're reading about somebody who's had a bad day, or something like that, you realise that not all people are bad it could just be that they've not had a good year or a good day, or like, they've been treated unfairly so they feel like they should treat other people unfairly."

Interview segment B

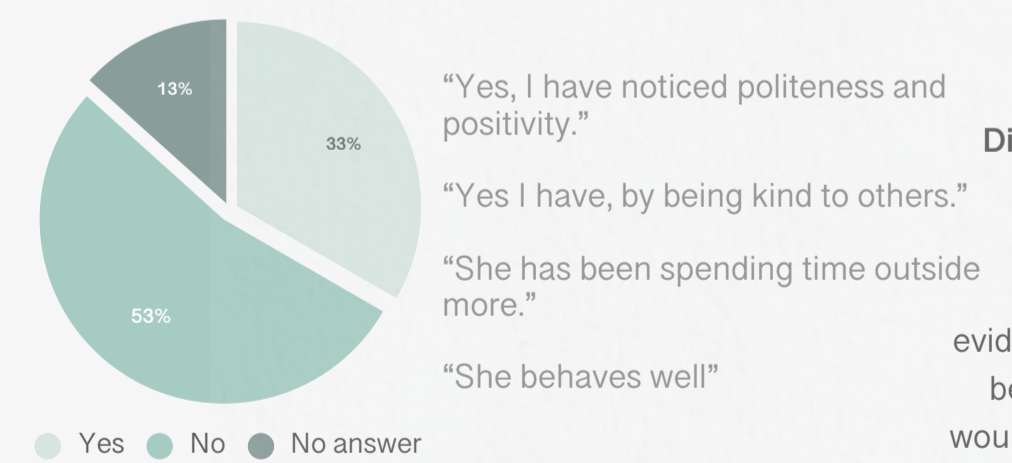
The first student exemplifies the essence of this research, which aims to ascertain if exposure to individuals making positive changes can cultivate an attitude where one desires to contribute to said positive change. The research originally sought to reveal not only the development of such attitudes but also their alignment with observable behaviours. While the limited time frame prevented any substantial, measurable, or conspicuous changes in the behaviour of the children, the current findings do suggest the potential for such alignment.

The second student refers to the positive impact that one of the activities had on her consideration for others, asserting to have developed a greater disposition to empathetic reasoning. Given that this idea predominantly occurred within a single session, it is highly encouraging that she independently recalled and raised this point. It suggests that even this short activity made an impact.

The aspiration is that with the consistent reinforcement of such messages over an extended duration, in conjunction with other key concepts explored during the research, these notions would gradually become influential in shaping her behaviour. The heightened empathy she mentions would ideally become a pivotal factor in her interpersonal interactions and responses to others.

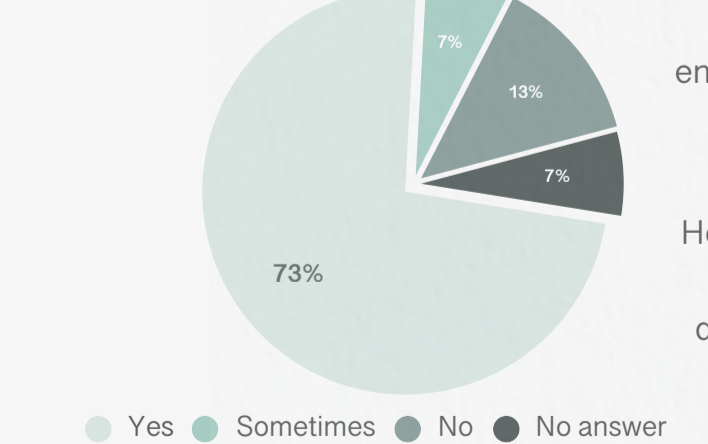
Parent/Carer responses

1) Have you noticed a change in your child's behaviour?



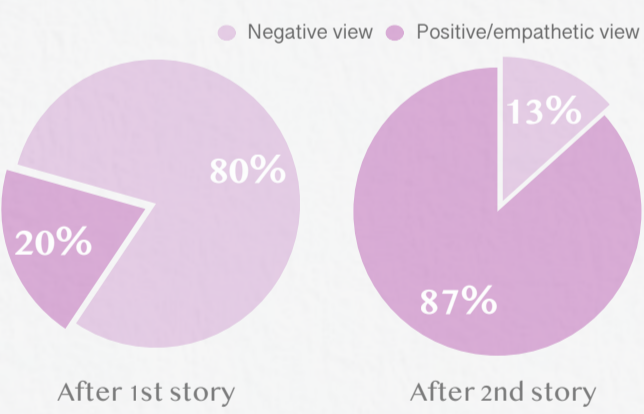
Discussion of parent/carer responses
As mentioned previously, it was evident that substantial behavioural changes wouldn't be observed in such a brief timeframe.

2) Has your child seemed more positive/optimistic?



With 33% stating they had noticed a change was extremely promising given that it exceeded expectations. Equally encouraging is the response to the second question, with 73% of parents reporting that their child appeared more positive.

However, it is important to emphasise that the sample size for this set of questionnaires was very small, consisting of just 15 participants. Consequently, whilst the results are hopeful, it is not possible to draw broader conclusions from these findings.



"This was my favourite because I could relate to what Josie felt."

Increase in prosocial self-efficacy

Interview segment A

In this example, the student conveys that observing positive individuals engaged in benevolent actions enhances her own perceived capability to engage in similar acts of kindness, reflecting an increase in prosocial self-efficacy.

This aligns with the findings of Enright and Yao's study as their research underscores the interconnectedness of prosocial self-efficacy and prosocial attitudes, highlighting how they serve as mediating factors through which the belief in altruistic human nature positively influences subsequent prosocial behaviours.

"So, in your first questionnaire, you put that sometimes you feel unsure about whether you can make a difference. I wondered whether that had changed at all?"

"I think that after looking at the people it makes me feel like I can make a difference because they've done something good. I feel like I can do something good as well."

OUTDOOR STRESS

They could go out doors and take care of animals so they could feel a sense of responsibility.

Another student suggested 'Prison Planting': "This would be an amazing chance for prisoners to experience nature, as they may not be outside in a while!"

"I would put a quiet place for the prisoners to talk about their lives and communicate about so many things and also do other activities like art to calm them down out of anger because I love art and it calms me down when I'm mad." (Picture used for background)



"If I was to put some things in a prison I would put activities, e.g. an ice skating [rink] and a choir. I think this would be good because they would probably forget that they're in prison."

