

Adolescents' Prosocial Behavior Predicts Good Grades Beyond Intelligence and Personality Traits

Maria Gerbino ,¹ Antonio Zuffianò,² Nancy Eisenberg,³ Valeria Castellani,¹ Bernadette Paula Luengo Kanacri,⁴ Concetta Pastorelli,¹ and Gian Vittorio Caprara¹

¹Sapienza University of Rome

²Liverpool Hope University

³Arizona State University

⁴Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies, Pontificia Universidad de Chile

Abstract

Objective: Researchers have demonstrated the prediction of academic functioning by children's prosocial behavior (PB). The goal of our study was to examine the contribution of adolescents' PB for middle and senior high school grades after controlling for stability of achievement and for intelligence, Big Five traits, and sociodemographic variables (i.e., sex and socioeconomic status).

Method: Study 1 examined on 165 adolescents (48.5% boys) the prediction by peer-reported PB in 7th grade of academic achievement at the end of junior high school, after controlling for the above variables. Study 2 examined the prediction by 927 (52% girls) 8th graders' PB of academic achievement 5 years later, at the end of senior high school, taking into account the stability of grades, personality traits, and socio-structural variables.

Results: Overall, hierarchical regression analysis indicated in both studies PB and Openness significantly predicted better grades in the short term and over time despite the high stability of grades across 5 years. Extraversion negatively predicted academic achievement across 1 year in junior high school.

Conclusion: Findings supported the view of PB as a strength and a key resource for adolescents' academic attainment.

Keywords: Academic achievement, Big Five traits, intelligence, longitudinal study, prosocial behavior

Different levels of educational attainment at different school grade levels may substantially affect adolescents' subsequent development. In particular, in the United States, 8th-grade academic achievement has been found to be a stronger predictor of college and career readiness than other factors assessed in high school (ACT, 2008). Similarly, senior high school grades have been associated with an increased chance to be admitted, to attend, and to complete college (Westrick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015) and with higher earnings in adulthood (French, Homer, Popovici, & Robins, 2015).

In the last 20 years, the positive youth development (PYD) perspective has emphasized the strength and plasticity of adolescents' development (Damon, 2004; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009) and focused on understanding developmental factors that sustain adolescents' personal and social well-being. In accordance with this perspective, and considering the relations between academic success in childhood and subsequent academic and life outcomes, it is

important to clarify the "flexible" factors that may promote academic success.

Prosocial behavior (PB) has been considered a relatively "malleable" variable that can be strengthened through appropriate educational actions (e.g., Caprara, Luengo Kanacri, Zuffianò, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2015; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2003). PB often has been defined as voluntary actions aimed at benefiting others (e.g., helping, consoling, donating; Eisenberg et al., 2006). PB has been found to predict school adjustment (i.e., academic achievement and peer acceptance) across grade levels in kindergarten and primary school (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Closson, 2009; Wentzel, 1993; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). In contrast to prior research, our research focused on the prediction by young adolescents' prosocial