

# The Role of Social Development in Elementary School Curricula: Past, Present, and Future

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**White Paper**

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## White Paper

*The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) is a picture storybook about Unhei, a young girl who is confronted with a difficult decision when she moves from Korea to the United States: Should Unhei keep her native Korean name, or should she adopt an Americanized name that will be easier for her classmates to pronounce and remember? Unhei's dilemma challenges elementary grade students to consider the importance of personal identity and to respect the culture of others. This book is one of many published over the past thirty years that address relevant social concerns faced by children. Yet at the same time it promotes the use of complex vocabulary words, deep-comprehension strategies, and basic reading skills. Texts like *The Name Jar* provide teachers with an opportunity to bridge the teaching of literature, literacy standards, and social skills through discussion and writing activities that are enjoyable and engaging to students.

Despite the ease with which the promotion of social development can be integrated into academic content, the two are rarely presented in a single, well-integrated curriculum. The tension between the teaching of academic-content knowledge and social awareness may cause one to wonder: *Is the promotion of social development in schools important? If so, why isn't it more widely accepted as an integral part of school curricula?* In this paper, we explore how the focus of American curricula has shifted over the past several decades—sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes dramatically—from an inclusion of prosocial education towards a heavy emphasis on mathematics and literacy. First, however, we provide a working definition of social development that may be promoted in the context of schools. Then, after a review of the educational policy shifts of the past 25 years that have affected the focus of social development in schools, we discuss how social skills can serve as a catalyst for academic success and suggest ways for educators to easily integrate social development into curricular frameworks supported by the recently promulgated Common Core State Standards.

### ***I. A School-Based Definition of Social Development:***

We identify “school-based social development” as actions that can be taken, decisions that can be made, or words and ideas that can be spoken by students and teachers in classrooms and schools to promote positive and healthy relationships among individuals and their surrounding world.

We find it useful in this review to divide school-based social development into two broad categories: *prosocial behavior* and *social understanding*. Both of these aspects of social development are malleable and can be shaped in schools.

*Prosocial behaviors* are those student social actions, observable to teachers, that include students' ability to cooperate with others, participate in classroom discussions and activities, follow classroom rules, share with others, and treat others with kindness. These behaviors are typical of what is expected of a student in any given classroom and are a commonplace requirement by teachers. The explicit promotion of clearly and consistently defined prosocial behaviors can help educators reduce disruptions and maintain order that is essential for learning in the classroom. Yet there are times when what can be inferred from the casual observation of the prosocial behaviors of individual students or the group only scratches the surface of what we think of as "deeper" aspects of students' social ability. For instance, conforming to classroom norms is one important and easily noticed aspect of students' pro-social behavior. However, how well students are able to communicate with one another and the teacher, how well they respect each other's opinions and concerns, and how well they express their own points of view are often even more critical aspects of a student's overall social development. These are the social behaviors that need to be practiced if schools are to have an impact on students' abilities to develop, manage, and maintain healthy and long lasting social relationships, both in and outside the classroom.

The promotion of *social understanding* is the complementary component of school-based social development. As with prosocial behavior, there is much about students' social understanding that lies underneath the surface of what they say about beliefs, values, attitudes, and conduct, both their own and those of others. Students may quickly learn to say what they believe is socially appropriate or acceptable, but their deeper, more authentic thoughts and feelings about social incidents, rules, and regulations can remain unclear to themselves or hidden from others. For example, while engaged in a discussion of *The Name Jar*, students may believe it is socially acceptable to say it is wrong to tease Unhei about her name, yet how sincere is this sentiment? Even with the best of intentions, would the students understand why someone might laugh, inadvertently or not, or be uncomfortable if they were a witness to Unhei's situation? Students' social understandings build upon their awareness of motivations, attitudes, and beliefs—subjective processes that take place within (and sometimes hidden beneath) a child's consciousness or capacity for self and social reflection.

These capacities have a powerful impact on students' ability to understand and relate to others, acknowledge and articulate differing perspectives, engage in deep ethical reflection, appreciate diversity, and develop trust. Students need a solid core of social understanding in order to autonomously and harmoniously engage in prosocial behavior. Reciprocally, students need to practice prosocial behavior to develop that solid core of social understanding. Taken together, they facilitate learning.

This is not a new idea. Fifty years ago, influential developmental psychologist and theorist Lev Vygotsky (1981) argued that social understanding is an *intramental* capacity that exists within the child. Vygotsky further proposed that prosocial behaviors are *intermental* capacities that occur through interactions between children. Both intramental and intermental capacities are necessary for the healthy social development of the whole child. In other words, prosocial behavior is best promoted through the careful design of a classroom *climate*. A positive intermental climate includes not only clearly stated and maintained norms of safety and respect, but also opportunities for students to practice prosocial actions. Social awareness is the academic emphasis of social development in classroom life. It can be promoted within each child through a mainstream focus on reading and discussing, with teacher and peers, texts such as *The Name Jar*.

The bridge that connects these two components—individual social-cognitive developments (intramental) and the educational socioacademic climate (intermental)—is built upon an essential set of core social competencies: constructive resolution of conflicts, responsible decision-making, and overall emotional and social contentment (Payton et al., 2008; Lobron & Selman, 2007; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Selman, 2003a; Wentzel, 1991; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

When explicitly cultivated, these social competencies serve to build strong, caring, and trusting relationships among students and their classmates, teachers, and other school staff—all factors that are conducive to a thriving learning climate (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). The development of trust in students in an accepting climate affects students' ability to feel safe and respected within the school and is critical to maximizing learning potential. Students who feel that their ideas, perspectives, and cultural identities are valued are more likely to feel comfortable in an educational setting and thus will be more motivated to achieve academically (Wentzel, 1991; Selman, 2003a; Reyes et al., 2012).

Importantly, beyond academic success, there is a growing body of evidence that the promotion of social development in elementary schools has a lasting positive effect on students' personal relationships, civic engagement, and overall achievement in middle and high school as well as everyday life (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Miles & Stipek, 2006).

## ***II. What Has Happened Over the Years to Prosocial Education?***

Throughout the history of public schooling in the United States, the country's educational goals have shifted to match the needs of its ever-changing society (Graham, 2005). In the early 1900s, school was a place where European immigrant parents sent their children to *assimilate* to a more "Americanized" mindset. By the 1920s, the public school was a place where affluent families began to send their children to *adjust* to a new era of strong democracy, with a future filled with possibility. This progressive time period embraced a flexible curriculum that promoted both academics and the arts. Teachers were given freedom in lesson planning and were encouraged to nurture students' psychological, social, moral, civic, and intellectual capacities (Graham, 2005). The elementary school was designed to have a pleasant atmosphere in which students could explore their own personal interests.

In the 1950s, following *Brown v. Board of Education's* ruling for the desegregation of schools, equal educational opportunity became *accessible* to students of all races and socioeconomic statuses. This ruling was accompanied by an influx of post World War II "baby boom" students, and thus created a high demand for more teachers and varied school programs. The notion of differentiated academic abilities within a single grade was introduced, followed by parents' requests for "gifted" classes for their children. The power of curricular choice shifted from the teacher to the local governmental educational agency, and the progressive social curriculum of earlier decades was replaced over the next 30 years with a demand for strong mathematics and science instruction designed for the college-bound student. By the 1980s, reports on education in America reflected alarming results: American students (particularly low income and minority students) were failing, and schools were accused of providing mediocre instruction. These results led the country to consciously prioritize improved academic *achievement* for all students. While school districts knew they needed to improve the learning of all children, policy makers knew that benchmark scores on standardized tests would need to be developed that could document their efforts.

This has led to a strict focus on the teaching of mathematics and literacy, subjects that became prioritized above all others under the popular guise that “if students can do the math and they know how to read, all the rest will fall into place.” Not coincidentally, these are the areas that can most readily be measured.

In our current and the previous decade, schooling has focused on standardized *assessment*. Districts are fighting to help students pass standardized tests that provide evidence to government agencies that the teachers and staff are doing their best. Most recently, in the first term of the Obama administration, rather than single out student effort as the only source or indicator of a school’s success or failure, federal policies have re-settled their gaze on teacher performance. Pressure on teachers is particularly strong in areas where teacher performance is heavily weighted by state and federal student standardized tests (Selman, 2003b). All this is context for the recent evolution of the Common Core State Standards (2012) as a guide to curriculum and instruction. Of interest to us is how these common learning standards draw heavily on the same types of competencies that can be promoted through prosocial literacy discussions afforded by a simple picture book like *The Name Jar*.

### ***III. A Renewed Interest in Social Development: Two Ways to View Its Impact on Academic Performance***

Meanwhile, as national attention has focused on the challenge of preparing all students for the future workplace of this young century, a crisis has also been brought to the forefront: a rising tide of bullying, school-wide violence, and student suicides. Alarming events such as these have prompted the social aspect of child and adolescent development to re-emerge as a topic of interest and importance for educational stakeholders. Educational researchers have taken a renewed interest in programs that promote healthy social relationships, caring communities, and positive school climate, all of which resonate with the purposeful and explicit teachings of social development. To that end, schools have increased their attention to social development as essential for a healthy classroom climate that is conducive to the learning of content knowledge. Numerous sociologists, psychologists, and educational researchers recognize the importance in creating a caring climate within schools and have found evidence that these types of curricula make an encouraging difference in students’ scholastic outcomes (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2003; Durlak et al., 2011). In a time period where educators are unsure of the best direction to take, a curriculum that integrates social skills with academic competencies may be a promising strategy.

We find it useful to frame two ways to look at this issue and its remedies: one is causal, the other reciprocal. From a causal perspective, there is increasing evidence that steps to promote a positive school climate and strong social skills improve academic achievement and prevent problem behaviors that lead to suspensions or expulsions (Schaps et al., 2003). From the reciprocal perspective, there is evidence that the integration of social and academic curricula will have a multiplier effect; the greater enhancement of each together will empower better performance in students overall (Selman, 2003a).

**A. Viewpoint 1: Social Development is Instrumental to Students' Academic Achievement!**

In recent times, rigorous scientific studies have reported findings that show a positive relationship between the promotion of social skills in school and students' academic achievement (Payton et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1991; Reyes et al., 2012). Experts have categorized school success to include three distinct components: *school attitude*, which includes students' motivation and responsibility to be active learners; *school behavior*, which includes students' level of engagement, patterns of attendance, and study habits; and *school performance*, which includes tests scores, grade-point average, and standardized test scores (Zins et al., 2004).<sup>1</sup> In a study that examined the connection between low-income elementary students' prosocial skills and literacy scores, researchers found that the more developed a student's social abilities, the higher grade-point average they tended to earn in reading (Miles & Stipek, 2006). A similar study looked at the impact of a socially integrated literacy curriculum applied over several years on elementary students' overall achievement and found that students exposed to this curriculum showed improvements in both math and reading, as well as reduced instances of hostile and depressive behaviors (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011). Correlational studies consistently show that desired intellectual outcomes are linked with students' "tendencies to be prosocial, positive interactions with peers, appropriate classroom conduct, and compliance" (Wentzel, 1991, p. 1067). Other researchers have gone as far as warning that "authentic instruction cannot take place unless teachers attend to the social and emotional aspects of learning," and that students perform better when they are "emotionally engaged in the learning process" (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 710).

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a detailed list of Social Development outcomes related to school success.

### **1. How does it Work?**

The competent inclusion and teaching of social skills seems to have a snowball effect on students' lives. Children and adolescents who practice perspective taking, empathy, and responsible decision-making are more likely to comply with classroom rules and exhibit cooperative classroom behavior—all of which are ingredients in a recipe for positive classroom climate. A prosocial classroom atmosphere is more conducive to learning because students feel less inhibited to ask questions, disrupting behaviors are minimized, small-group and team projects are more likely to stay on task, and students' overall engagement is amplified. Researchers have found that “students in emotionally supportive classrooms report greater interest, enjoyment, and engagement,” and they “tend to choose more complex cognitive activities” (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 701).

Further, social skills can *indirectly* promote academic success by enabling students to develop healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. For example, students who trust each other are more likely to help one another muddle through difficult or confusing content. Also, students who develop meaningful relationships with their teachers tend to be more motivated to pay attention and strive for success (Miles & Stipek, 2006; Wentzel, 1991). Finally, the quality of classroom relationships can have a powerful impact on how students perceive school. Students who are socially responsible and accepted by their peers and teachers tend to embrace school and its purpose—it is critical that this positive, enthusiastic mindset be set early in a child's academic trajectory, as first experiences tend to leave a lasting impression on students.

### **2. Beyond The Classroom...**

Prosocial skills do not stop at the classroom door. There is evidence they can cross the boundaries in and out of schools to reach all corners of a student's life. Beyond academic achievement, healthy social development positively impacts students' personal and social relationships because these skills enable youth to develop trusting and caring relationships with their peers, teachers, family members, and members of the greater community. For example, skills such as perspective taking, empathy, negotiation strategies, and conflict resolution can help students successfully navigate situations on the playground, hallways, lunchrooms—the areas of the school where most disruptive behavior usually occurs (LaRusso, Jones, Brown, & Aber, in press).



## ***B. Viewpoint 2: A Reciprocal Relationship—Academic Achievement & Social Awareness!***

Strong evidence indicates that there is a reciprocal relationship between academic achievement and social development. Not only can social skills boost school success, school success can also boost social skills! Educational researchers reviewed several socially based interventions on students' overall achievement and found that prevention strategies targeting students' academic skills had an indirect, yet positive effect on the students' social behaviors (Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1997; Jones et al., 2011). It is a popular notion that social skills and academic achievement may serve as catalysts for each other, yet both competencies need to be nurtured and encouraged in order for each to blossom. As a result of these findings, and others of a similar nature, new curricula are being designed "based on the idea that improving function in one domain (e.g., interpersonal interactions) influences functioning in other domains (e.g., academic engagement and attention)" (Jones, Brown, Hogg, & Aber, 2010, p. 830).

### ***1. Integrating Social Development and Academic Content into a Unified Curriculum...***

Most current efforts to promote social development are fragmented. For example, the guidance counselor may make weekly visits to classrooms to talk with the children about kindness and sharing, or the assistant principal may come in to discuss the importance of avoiding violent behaviors. While well intended, these isolated sessions pack very little punch and have almost no sustained impact. In this light, it makes sense that curricula begin to integrate socially proactive content into their frameworks. To achieve optimal results, recent evidence suggests melding the teaching of social skills and academic content into a single "socioacademic curriculum" that can be taught across grade levels to all types of learners throughout the entire academic year.

The notion of curricular integration is strongly supported by educational researchers and speaks to the vision of teaching the "whole child"— efforts to promote one capacity will result in greater success of the other. Child development experts argue that social development should not be viewed as an extraneous or separate component to academic curricula; rather, these skills are crucial and can be easily incorporated into the content (Jones et al., 2011; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Zins et al., 2004). In reference to their reciprocal relationship, researchers say that social skills can be "infused into the regular academic curriculum" (Zins et al., 2004, p. 9), so that each can reinforce the other.

Emphasis has been placed on the importance of introducing curricula that integrate literacy and social development to preschool- and elementary-aged children (Jones et al, 2011; Miles & Stipek, 2006). Young children's literacy competencies are viewed as particularly critical to preparing them for academic success, as reading is a skill that is expected across all areas of school and home life. Thus, while basic social skills can be taught and reinforced by teachers of all content areas and grade levels, we suggest that a good place to begin this curricular integration is with language arts and literacy.

## ***2. What does an Integrated Socioacademic Curriculum Look Like?***

A strong socioacademic curriculum is grounded in sound theory and research. In addition to the scientific research presented in this paper, it is important that the curriculum aligns well with the goals of the school and the needs of its students. A solid socioacademic framework pays close attention to the *social aspects of learning and teaching* and thus places equal importance on *classroom climate* and *content matter*. The teacher can foster a safe, caring learning environment by modeling *prosocial behaviors* and promoting *social understanding*. A classroom with a climate conducive to learning promotes student participation, cooperation, and respect for others. Socioacademic content matter is rich with multicultural or dilemma-based literature that challenges students to consider multiple solutions or viewpoints, which is also a requirement of the new Common Core State Standards. For example, embedded within the K–12 Speaking & Listening component of the framework is a *Comprehension and Collaboration* strand that promotes “appropriate collaborative discussions with diverse partners” (Common Core State Standards, 2012). This is reflective of socioacademic classrooms that provide learners with opportunities to engage in small-group, pair, and whole-class discussions pertaining to the academic topic. Participants in these oral-language activities are held accountable to the subject matter and are therefore expected to use sound reasoning and verifiable evidence to respectfully defend and refute ideas, another requirement of the Common Core State Standards. Finally, a socioacademic curriculum is designed as an *enduring and unified program*. Ideally, the curriculum spans from kindergarten through middle school, or beyond, and its principles would be endorsed by not only the teacher, but by all of the school's personnel. To reinforce a healthy learning climate, social dimensions would be adopted as a district-wide culture change where prosocial behaviors are informally modeled, not only in the classroom, but also in the cafeteria, on the playground, on the school bus, etc.

Time is also a critical element; in order for the curriculum to be effective, it needs to be implemented all year long, across several academic years.

#### ***IV. To Build a Strong Link Between Literacy and Social Development...***

Storytelling through a variety of texts is a classic yet still powerful vehicle for the integration of academic content and social development. Multicultural read alouds, or other storybooks that examine issues of social justice, civic engagement, and cultural empathy, can be used effectively across all grade levels to teach a wealth of literacy and social skills. Non-fiction texts that introduce multiple viewpoints or a dilemma within society without a single obvious solution are also a great way to get students interested in academic content, while allowing them to develop socially.

##### ***A. Academic Discussions are Critical to Comprehension...***

*Academic discussions* are a critical accompaniment to socially-oriented, multicultural literature. Consider that ideal pausing point in *The Name Jar*, where Unhei is about to make a choice about her name. Her dilemma presents students with an opportunity to discuss and share their ideas with others. Teachers can capitalize on classroom dialogue as a way to assess and promote students' comprehension of the text, as well as nurture social understanding (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Academic discussions can be used as powerful activities in both the early and late elementary grades. Discussions have the potential to move students beyond *simple* comprehension to more complex, *deep* comprehension (Snow, 2011). The utilization of academic discussions fully supports the goals of the Common Core State Standards.

##### ***B. A Case in Point: The Name Jar***

Let us return to *The Name Jar*. This story follows Unhei's exploration of personal and cultural identity. From a social perspective, students are pressed to think about differences among people. *Is it okay to be different? What are ways that we can respond to differences? How does it feel to be different from others?* During the first half of the story, the reader learns that Unhei worries that the American kids will not like her because of her strange name and foreign culture. In school, Unhei's classmates present her with a jar filled with options for a new English name; at home, her family speaks proudly of her Korean name and of its sentimental value. There is an ideal pausing point, about halfway through the story, when the reader can consider Unhei's dilemma and decide: *Should Unhei change her name? Why or why not?* From a literacy perspective, this is an excellent opportunity for the teacher to assess students' comprehension of the text by requiring them to take a stance and provide evidence for their reasoning.

In addition to opportunities for comprehension growth, the text offers a rich array of multiple-meaning words (*stamp, pouch, character*), as well as complex vocabulary words (*curious, nervous, relieved*).

The brilliance of storybooks like *The Name Jar* is that they can be used as read alouds within the early elementary grades and as independent or guided-reading texts for the upper elementary grades. In the early years, grades K–2, reading a text aloud helps students with both oral language skills and decoding strategies. In these grades, read alouds help students become familiar with print and of the habits of reading (e.g. left-to-right, page-to-page, words making up sentences and paragraphs, etc.). Students can also practice listening skills, build vocabulary by hearing words used appropriately, exercise attention span, and gain exposure to new situations and social topics. For older students in the upper elementary years, grades 3–5, storybooks can be used to promote a deep level of reading comprehension, as well as understanding of advanced vocabulary, character development, author’s purpose, and figurative language. As with the younger children, these texts can expose students to both familiar and unfamiliar social issues and give them a chance to contemplate how to best navigate those topics.

For example, let’s imagine a classroom where a teacher has just read the first half of *The Name Jar* aloud to her students. She pauses and asks the students, “*What does Unhei’s name mean in Korean?*” A student raises his hand to respond, “*Grace.*” The teacher nods, “*Good job. Do you think Unhei should change her name?*” Another student raises her hand and says, “*Yes, it’s too hard to pronounce.*” This is an example of a simple comprehension exchange that exhibits students’ surface-level understanding. While the teacher does ask students questions about the content of the text, the questions are closed-ended and do not prompt students to elaborate on their responses or to “read between the lines” of the story.

Now, let’s imagine the same classroom, except this time the teacher asks, “*What does Unhei’s name mean in Korean?*” A student raises his hand to respond, “*Grace.*” The teacher presses the student to elaborate, “*How do you know that?*” The student searches through the pages and points, “*The man on page 14 says it means ‘grace.’*” The teacher applauds the student for finding evidence in the text, yet she still probes deeper, “*How would that particular man know what Unhei’s name means?*” The students chime in together, “*Because he’s from Korea. He can speak the language.*” Through the use of open-ended questions, the teacher has prompted students to make inferences that are not explicitly stated in the text and required them to use evidence and reasoning to support their answers.

This strategy is conducive to deep reading comprehension and reflects the desired learning outcomes called for in the Common Core State Standards (2012).

Let's now consider how discussion can promote deep comprehension and social understanding at the same time. The teacher asks, "*Do you think Unhei should change her name?*" A student raises her hand and says, "*Yes, it's too hard to pronounce.*" At this point, the teacher attempts to bring multiple students in dialogue with each other. This gives children the opportunity to practice positive social behaviors, while still contemplating the subject matter, "*Can anyone explain why they agree, or disagree, that Unhei should change her name because it's too hard to pronounce?*" A boy responds to his classmate, "*I disagree because being hard to pronounce is not a good enough reason. Unhei's name means something and is special to her family. A name master in Korea picked that name.*" A third voice chimes in and says, "*Unhei's name may be special, but kids at school will tease her and make her feel embarrassed...*" This exchange exemplifies the beginnings of an academic discussion where students practice healthy social behaviors and at the same time develop greater social understanding and explore the text's underlying messages at a deeper level of content analysis.

In summary, discussions move students away from "simple comprehension" (which consists of basic-content recall and literal facts) to "deep comprehension" (which consists of analyzing character motives, authors' purpose, multiple perspectives, and cause-and-effect). The oral format of the activity allows students to express themselves, articulate thoughts, practice responding to others, and navigate new social situations. Discussion-based activities can be viewed as a bridge to connect social understanding and prosocial behaviors in the classroom. Socially-oriented activities such as these simultaneously exercise students' social and academic skills.

## ***V. Theory and Practice Together:***

### ***A. Teachers Can Integrate Social Development into an Existing Curriculum.***

There are three major points to consider when integrating social development into an academic curriculum: *classroom climate*, *academic content*, and *discussion activities*.

The establishment of a thriving school and supportive classroom climate is the responsibility of the school staff. Beyond rules and expectations that may be put in place, the adults in the school need to model prosocial behaviors.

Through observation and practice, students will develop a better understanding of what it means to be socially responsible. Respectful classroom environments enable students to trust their teachers and their peers with their thoughts, feelings, and cultural differences. Learning potential is maximized in climates where students feel accepted and valued. Schools bear the responsibility of setting the temperature. In an analogous way, if the adults in the school cannot effectively model prosocial behaviors for their students, then the district needs to decide how to better support its staff in the promotion of a positive whole-school climate in which teachers can trust their peers and leadership.

The materials through which academic content is delivered can easily integrate themes that promote social understanding. Text is the most powerful way to promote socioacademic learning. Literature rich with challenging social topics—from picture books to chapter books— can help broaden students' depth of content understanding. In addition to realistic fiction, nonfiction texts (e.g. magazine articles, newspapers, historical works, and biographies) introduce opportunities that challenge students to consider multiple perspectives, contemplate motives, and explore solutions. Classroom unit or lesson themes are also a terrific way to infuse prosocial topics into the curriculum. For example, teachers could focus on a different character trait to promote each week (e.g. bravery, perseverance, or responsibility), and highlight those traits when analyzing student behaviors or character traits in the texts.

Ultimately, children need to talk with each other, as well as the teacher, about what they are learning. Discussion activities help students process their thoughts, synthesize academic content, and draw inferences from complex material. Dialogue allows children to practice prosocial behaviors and social understanding. Teachers can use open-ended questions to push students to deeper understanding; they can help students articulate their thoughts by rephrasing students' words; and they can encourage students to build upon each other's ideas by asking them to repeat or reflect upon the input of their classmates. Further, teachers can hold students accountable to content knowledge by asking them to provide reason and evidence for their claims.

There are many ways to encourage student-to-student discourse: turn and talks, think-pair-shares, small-group book talks, structured debates, or whole-class conversations. For teachers who are concerned with disruptive behaviors, there are options for manageable whole-class activities.

An activity that we recommend is called a *fishbowl*<sup>2</sup>, which permits all students to participate in the discussion at their own discretion. Also, it is important for educators to remember that an academic discussion doesn't have to be long! All it takes is a few solid minutes of quality exchange for students to reap the socioacademic benefits of dialogue (Elizabeth, Ross-Anderson, Snow, & Selman, 2012).

### ***B. What Types of Students Can Benefit from Social Development?***

It is a misconception that social development benefits only economically disadvantaged students. Many prosocial curricula target specific populations that include students identified as having social, behavioral, or emotional "problems." Moreover, these programs commonly frequent low-income, urban school districts. The reality is that curricula that promote prosocial skills have been found to yield academic and social success for students across grades K–8, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, for a spectrum of racially and ethnically diverse students, including a variety of differing types of learners (Payton et al., 2008). In other words, social development has the power to help *all students, of all backgrounds*. Education psychologists encourage curriculum developers and interventionists to implement socially proactive curricula across the general population of whole schools (Jones et al., 2010). It is our view that the teaching of social skills should not be confined to a single classroom, grade level, or school. The more widely taught and embraced social development is across a community, the more powerful an impact it will have on learners. This viewpoint is consistent with an ecological model of child development that encourages us to consider the multiple settings that affect a child and how the differing interactions in the environment may influence her social and academic development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

### ***VI. Conclusion: Socioacademic Instruction Positively Impacts School Attitudes, Behavior, and Performance.***

Throughout the history of schooling in America, much has changed on the educational landscape. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an epidemic of drugs and violence afflicted the United States, particularly in low-income urban and rural communities. These challenges promoted schools to consider approaches aimed at the prevention of destructive behaviors among youth.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for details on how to conduct a *fishbowl* discussion.

By the late 1990s, the focus of educational policy redirected its attention towards academic achievement, with emphasis on numeracy and literacy skills. In more recent years, educational researchers and practitioners have recognized the need to promote an educated *and* ethical society. This has led to the teaching of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, including communication skills, team building skills, and relationship skills. Educators now are resurrecting their belief that a good education must foster a respectful citizenry.

Findings that link prosocial skills and social awareness to academic achievement across age, race, and socioeconomic status are repeatedly mentioned in the literature, and this body of knowledge has transitioned educators' viewpoint of teaching social development from one that is hopeful of potential impact to one that senses a critical urgency in integrating these competencies into their curricula. In a time and place in which bullying, childhood aggression, and destructive behaviors are becoming more evident, it is imperative that social skills be fostered to maximize students' learning potential. As suggested by child development expert Dr. Kathryn Wentzel (1991), prosocial "behaviors and interpersonal forms of competence are often more powerful predictors of achievement than intellectual ability" (p. 1066).

Recent research has shown that the teaching of social development is predictive of increased content understanding, higher grade-point averages, higher standardized-test scores, and improved social responsibility. It is widely accepted among developmental psychologists and educational researchers that the integration of social development into academic curricula is ideal for optimizing students' learning. Socioacademic instruction positively impacts *school attitudes*, *school behavior*, and *school performance*. A combination of prosocial behaviors and social understanding is the underpinning of a social development framework, which can reinforce the growth of students' healthy relationships, responsible decision-making, academic achievement, and overall emotional contentment. Social development can be easily integrated into an academic curriculum through the establishment of an inviting classroom climate, socially responsive literature, and discussion activities that allow children to practice social behaviors. A socioacademic curriculum is one that yields thoughtful, well-adjusted students with scholastic ambition, drive, and the ability to achieve a cooperative culture.



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## APPENDIX A

### *Social Development Curricular Outcomes that are Linked to School Success*

Adapted from Zins et al., 2004, p. 17

#### **School Attitudes**

- Stronger sense of community
- Motivation to achieve academically
- Higher aspirations for personal academic achievement
- Positive attitudes towards school
- Willingness to resolve conflicts peacefully

#### **School Behavior**

- Increased prevalence of prosocial behaviors
- Fewer absences; improved attendance
- Reduced rates of conduct problems
- Fewer hostile or aggressive behaviors
- Increased classroom engagement

#### **School Performance**

- Higher grades in mathematics, language arts, and social studies
- Increased standardized-test scores
- Improved higher-level reasoning skills
- Increased general-academic performance over time
- Effective problem-solving skills

## APPENDIX B

### Fishbowl Discussion

#### Summary:

Fishbowl activities enable students to actively listen and respond to the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of their classmates. The goal of this activity is to engage a small group of students in an authentic conversation. This activity is appropriate for students in grades K–12. Discussions can last between 5 – 30 minutes.

#### Preparation:

These discussions usually follow the reading of a particular text introduced by the teacher. The teacher needs to prepare an open-ended discussion topic that does not necessarily have a single answer or solution. For example: *Should Unhei keep her native Korean name, or adopt a more American name?* Participants should be familiar with the topic and understand the discussion question.

To prepare for the actual fishbowl dialogue, place five chairs in a circle in the center of the room. Ask four students to volunteer to begin the fishbowl by sitting in one of the chairs; they will leave one seat empty to represent an invitation to students outside of the fishbowl who may want to join the conversation. All remaining students or "observers" should stand in a larger circle around the inner circle of students.

#### Activity Rules:

1. There should always be four people seated within the fishbowl.
2. Students within the fishbowl may self-select when they would like to leave by simply standing up and joining the outer circle.
3. When a student leaves the fishbowl, another student from the outer circle must take a place inside the fishbowl. Alternately, if a fifth student takes a seat in the available chair, another student within the fishbowl must leave the conversation. (Usually this is self-selected, but a teacher may appoint someone if necessary.)
4. During the course of the fishbowl, observers in the outer circle are not allowed to speak. Their job is to listen and learn from the fishbowl students.

5. Fishbowl participants must stay on topic. The teacher may intervene if necessary to guide students back to the topic.
6. Make sure everybody seated within in the fishbowl has an opportunity to talk.
7. Students within the fishbowl should strive to understand the viewpoints of others by asking questions and building on ideas.

**Conclusion:**

At the conclusion of the fishbowl activity, the teacher should rephrase the discussion question and summarize the multiple viewpoints that were raised during the activity.

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