CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Social Skills

As educators, how do we determine that a student is successful in elementary school? One obvious measure of academic success in an elementary school classroom is academic achievement. Following from that, one fairly well-accepted measure of academic achievement is the assessment of students' mastery of grade-level content via standardized tests. For example, a third grader is successful if proficient on tests that assess mastery of the third-grade language arts, math, science, and social studies content covered in the approved curriculum. Of course, educators often make the case that there are other ways to measure success in school. In many instances, other suggested measures of success include objectives that are more difficult to quantify: the ability to apply content and skills learned in school to real-world problems, feelings of self-efficacy as a learner, civic engagement, or even a sense of acceptance and belonging. Regardless of the definition of academic success used, the premise of this book is that fostering and promoting social competence among students will enhance their success in school.

In inclusive classrooms—that is, classrooms in which students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers without disabilities—it is often students with disabilities who experience compromised academic achievement. These students are also more likely than their peers without disabilities to be viewed as less socially skilled than their classmates and to be less socially accepted—both by their peers and their teachers. Inclusive education has been promoted for over 25 years as a way to increase the academic achievement and social status of elementary students with disabilities. As far back as the Regular Education Initiative (REI) in 1985, including students with

disabilities in general education classrooms with their same-age peers has been promoted as a viable, if not morally necessary, option for improving the stubbornly persistent poor postschool outcomes that students with disabilities continue to experience. It is up to classroom teachers, however, to provide instruction—through pedagogical choices and curricular adoptions and adaptations—that fosters success. This book provides a rationale for focusing on social competence in the elementary classroom and clarifies some of the differences in conceptions of what characteristics and behaviors make up one's social competence. In later chapters, we also provide descriptions of interventions and strategies stemming from those various conceptions that can be used to enhance and promote social competence as a way to bolster success. We start with a brief summary of the research base linking social competence to academic success.

RESEARCH BASE

Research demonstrates that social skills—and the social competence afforded by mastery of social skills—are important mediators of academic success. That is, a student's social competence has an impact, albeit indirect, on his or her academic achievement. As a striking example of this, social competence in the third grade has been shown to predict academic achievement in the eighth grade above and beyond (i.e., "controlling for") third-grade achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). This research reminds us that if our goals as educators of elementary school students include lasting and continuous academic achievement, then we must attend to our students' social competence as well as their mastery of academic skills and knowledge. Attention to social competence should be considered not simply as a way to manage behavior and promote smooth operation of the classroom setting but also as a way to maximize achievement.

Considering that students with disabilities in elementary school classrooms are often identified as having poor social skills and are generally less well accepted than their typically developing peers, it is also important to note that the relationship between social competence and academic success can be both positive or negative; research reveals that social competence—or lack thereof—predicts both positive and negative academic outcomes for students (Bursuck & Asher, 1986; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987; Ray & Elliott, 2006; Wentzel, 1993; Wilson, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2007). On the positive end of the spectrum, research has linked school-related social competence with longer term adult, nonschool outcomes (Gest, Sesma, Masten, & Tellegen, 2006; McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001; Parker, Rubin, Price, & De Rosier, 1995). In academic domains, for example, social competence is associated with school success across grades and ability levels; social competence predicts grade promotion, high school completion, and participation in postsecondary education. In fact, in some seminal research, characteristics, and behaviors thought to reflect social competence were found to be more predictive of some academic achievements than tests of cognitive ability (Lambert, 1972; Feldhusen, Thurston, & Benning, 1970).

On the other end of the continuum, an absence of social competence can be predictive of school failure. Grade retention, disability status, experience with disciplinary

action, and school dropout are a few of the numerous negative outcomes associated with underdeveloped social competence (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990). Moreover, employment patterns, delinquency, and civic participation in adulthood are related to the social competence skills acquired and demonstrated by students throughout the school years.

From all this, we conclude that social competence matters. Next, we summarize the importance and role of social competence in inclusive classrooms, where students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers, and underscore the importance of positive peer interactions in those settings. This is followed by a brief description of two pathways through which social competence is linked to academic success. We conclude this chapter with a brief description of specific social skills that have been shown over time to be valued by classroom teachers.

SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Inclusive education, or the participation of students with disabilities in the classrooms of their same-aged peers without disabilities, relies heavily—in theory and in practice—on successful social interactions among students across ability levels. Classroom tasks in inclusive classrooms commonly include activities built on interaction and engagement with peers. This shift in pedagogy is based in part on teachers' desire to build on the strengths that heterogeneous classrooms afford. The greater use of peer-mediated and cooperative forms of instruction also reflects educators' responses to the changing demands of success in the workplace where group problem solving, building upon the ideas of others, and sharing resources are associated with greater gains, more efficiency, and better outcomes. Working and learning with others necessarily involves talking, questioning, compromising and even arguing. Students who can navigate these tasks well are in a good position to be successful in school and beyond.

In order to prepare students for that success—in postsecondary school settings and the workplace—and give them the skills they will need to function in a global economy, educators often use a variety of forms of peer-mediated instruction. Peer-mediated instruction includes such techniques as cooperative learning groups, peer tutoring, and "team" approaches to task completion as well as variations of peer editing/feedback. All of these peer-mediated pedagogical tools require students to interact with their peers around academic tasks as the means to honing their academic skills. For many students, this is a "win–win"; both academic and social skills increase. However, not all students can easily navigate interactions with their peers to benefit academically. For instance, students with disabilities are subject to higher rates of peer rejection and negative self-perceptions than students without disabilities (Nowicki, 2003).

Indeed, disability status during childhood increases the risk of victimization (e.g., being bullied at school) (Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994; Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992). Poor social skills, which frequently coexist with disability status, prevent many students from positive peer engagement, which thus hinders them from reaping the benefits of peer-mediated instruction. It makes sense, therefore, that teachers who value peer interaction are drawn to learning more about improving the social skills, social competence, and social acceptance of students with disabilities.

PEER REJECTION: THE OTHER EXTREME

While promoting social competence is valued for academic and postschool success, at the other end of the continuum, a lack of social competence can inhibit social acceptance, which can thus result in harm. For example, having little to no social circle, which can be dependent on one's social competence, is linked to higher rates of school disengagement, social rejection, and even victimization, all of which are associated with lower rates of self-esteem and higher rates of depression-like symptoms. Indeed, the combination of social skills deficits and disability labels can endorse various forms of peer rejection, which predicts experiences of bullying, alienation, and the associated consequences. Thus, a chain reaction of rejection, mediated by social competence difficulties, influences many of the negative academic and social outcomes experienced by students with disabilities.

It probably comes as no surprise that childhood rejection increases one's risk of dropout, adult unemployment, and maladjustment (Vaughn, Haager, Hogan, & Kouzekanani, 1992). Furthermore, rejection by peers during a student's younger years often remains a constant lived experience through adulthood (Vaughn, McIntosh, & Spencer-Rowe, 1991). One way to change patterns of rejection for students with disabilities is to address social skills development in an intentional way in elementary schools. Additionally, providing frequent opportunities for positive interaction between students with disabilities and their peers can help replace peers' negative social perceptions of students with disabilities, which play a substantial role in rejection status (Hastings & Graham, 1995; Whitaker, 1994) and ultimately lead to poor academic achievement. In Chapter 5, we further elaborate the benefits of peer mediated, small-group instruction on both academic and social goals, and provide examples of evidence-based practices in peer-mediated instruction that teachers can employ in inclusive classrooms. These techniques are one way to address the social difficulties sometimes faced by students with disabilities and improve, overall, the social competence of all classroom members.

PATHWAYS CONNECTING SOCIAL COMPETENCE TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Most teachers do not have to be convinced of the important connection between social competence and academic success. They have seen the relationship play out in their classrooms on a regular basis. However, when pressed to explain the processes underlying that connection, teachers may default to intuition or common sense. Teachers may even wonder: Why do the underlying processes matter? Isn't it enough to know that social skills are important and to foster them?

We believe that consideration of the underlying processes *is* important if we are going to make inroads. In this section, we describe two specific pathways through which social competence is thought to affect academic achievement. The first involves mastery and demonstration of skills we refer to as "academic enablers." The second pathway is through perception: A student's self-perception of social competence as well as peers' and teachers' perception of that student's social competence is thought to play

a role in achievement. For educators interested in promoting social competence, under-standing these pathways is important to help guide decision making about pedagogy and curriculum. Understanding these pathways should prove helpful for teachers in prioritizing experiences and activities in the classroom on a day-to-day basis.

Social Skills as Academic Enablers

Part of being socially competent is mastery of specific social skills sets. Social skills are valuable in a wide range of settings. In learning environments, specific social skills can be thought of as "academic enablers." Academic enablers are attitudes and behaviors (e.g., motivation and strong interpersonal skills) that facilitate student learning (DiPerna & Elliott, 2002). Having a high level of social knowledge—that is, knowing what to do and when to do it in school contexts (Bursuck & Asher, 1986)—is one example of a social skill that is an academic enabler. When students in elementary school classrooms demonstrate a high level of social knowledge, they generally experience the approval of their peers and teachers. Teacher and peer approval is, in turn, paramount to the school success of students both with and without disabilities as it affords membership in the overall identity of the school. Students with disabilities, however, often feel less connected to their school and report lower feelings of belonging to the school com-munity than their peers without disabilities. Following this logic, competence in social knowledge—that is, knowing what to do when—is directly related to school attach-ment, which is then related to student achievement.

Social knowledge	⇨	Approval of peers and teachers	⇨	Attachment to school	⇨	Academic achievement
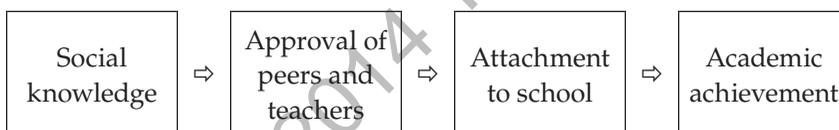
Considering this process allows teachers to think about multiple points of entry for impacting a student's academic achievement. Certainly, directly targeting academic achievement through directly teaching academic skills and abilities is prudent. How-ever, we argue that targeting social knowledge is equally important to academic success. Additionally, understanding the links allows educators to consider the other important processes at work. Increasing social knowledge should result in higher rates of approval by peers and teachers, but educators who are aware of this path can also make addi-tional efforts to foster acceptance and approval. Likewise, a savvy educator will also be on the lookout for ways to increase students' attachment to school—all in the service of promoting academic achievement in the present as well as in years to come.

Perceptions of Social Competence

A second pathway connecting social competence to academic success is through percep-tions. The ways in which peers perceive a fellow student's social abilities, for example, is central to the social status of that student. In this regard, the social capabilities—or deficits or idiosyncrasies—that elementary students display in school settings are

associated with popularity or rejection among peers (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Similarly, social behavior in the classroom impacts the reputation a student develops with adults in a school. A positive reputation among teachers may afford individual students opportunities that may otherwise not exist. For example, teachers who perceive specific students to be more socially capable than others are more likely to place additional value in (e.g., grant approval to) those students. That approval can translate into more and higher quality attention from those teachers.

Not only do the perceptions of others affect a student's overall social competence, but a student's self-perception of his or her social competence also affects acceptance by others, adding to the web of connections.

Self-perception of social competence	⇨ Peer and teacher perception of social competence	⇨ Approval of peers and teachers
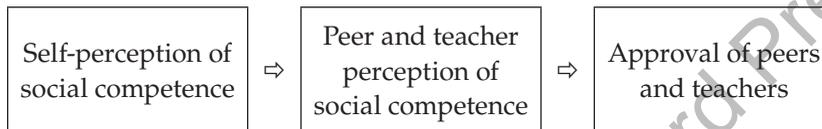
Some researchers have suggested that the social skills capacity of students is rooted in how well they believe their responses to social tasks are received by others (see Gresham, 1992). In this case, "social tasks" includes all manner of interactions with teachers and peers that take place in school environments. For example, social responses that are required for completion of collaborative group work with peers and reactions to teacher directives are forms of interaction through which students can gauge the efficacy of their own social competence. Students who perceive their social participation as strong and capable are more likely to exhibit confidence and develop friendships with peers, thus minimizing opportunities for social rejection. Additionally, positive self-perception increases one's self-esteem, which allows for a comfortable existence in learning environments, thereby increasing attachment to school.

Students with negative self-perceptions of their social abilities are less likely to initiate interactions with peers and participate in group activities unprompted, in effect closing themselves to friendships and traditionally valued acceptance. Furthermore, a displayed lack of confidence can deter peers from initiating contact or inviting participation in various activities. Academically, students who are perceived to be lacking in self-confidence are less likely to work collaboratively with peers and to thus reap the benefits of peer-mediated instruction and authentic cooperative learning.

SOCIAL SKILLS VALUED BY TEACHERS

Social skills are often described as a set of abilities that enable children to respond in acceptable ways to certain social requests (Elliott & McKinnie, 1994). In a classroom setting, social requests often come from teachers. Research has shown that elementary school teachers consistently value certain classroom social skills and even require them in their classrooms. For example, teachers, by and large, expect students to attend to and follow directions, request assistance in appropriate ways, ignore peer distractions,

and manage conflicts with peers and adults (Hersh & Walker, 1983; Kerr & Zigmond, 1986; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003). Teachers also expect students to demonstrate self-control and cooperation skills (Gresham, Dolstra, Lambros, McLaughlin, & Lane, 2000; Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2004). Often teachers' classroom demands reflect an expectation that these skills are acquired and demonstrated in a variety of everyday situations. In sum, these expectations represent a set of high-level social skills. These skills and behaviors are good examples of "academic enablers" described earlier in this chapter; when combined with academic content competence, these skills form a pathway to academic success.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND WHAT'S AHEAD

In this opening chapter, we introduced social competence as a set of skills that allow students to meet the various academic and social expectations of an elementary classroom, a concept we explore further in the chapters to come. Students with disabilities often display lower levels of social competence than their peers and, therefore, often experience compromised academic and social outcomes. The link between social competence and academic achievement is strong—so strong, in fact, that those students perceived as socially competent individuals, regardless of disability status, are more likely to reach many short- and long-term educational goals (e.g., grade promotion, graduation, and postsecondary schooling). Thus, it is imperative for elementary educators in inclusive settings to emphasize the learning and practice of social competencies so that students with and without disabilities alike are more prepared for school and postschool success. The following is a list of major points introduced in this chapter:

✓ Social competence is a strong mediator of academic success.

✓ A student's level of social competence in the early grades can predict both immediate and future school achievements and long-term adult outcomes.

✓ Inclusive education relies heavily—both in theory and in practice—on successful social interactions between students with and without disabilities.

✓ Peer-mediated instruction, a concept expanded upon in Chapter 5, is a commonly used instructional strategy that facilitates peer interaction in inclusive settings.

✓ Students with disabilities experience higher rates of social rejection, which is thus linked to higher rates of school disengagement and dropout.

✓ Providing authentic classroom opportunities for students with disabilities to develop and practice social competencies with their peers reduces and prevents social rejection.

✓ Social competence can influence academic achievement through two pathways: "academic enablers" and perception.

✓ "Social knowledge"—or knowing what to do and when in the classroom environment—is an example of an academic enabler.

✓ Having a positive reputation among teachers and peers—or being perceived favorably—is an example of perception as a pathway to academic achievement.

✓ The social skills associated with social competence can be thought of as knowing how to respond to academic and social requests; perhaps the most necessary skill set for succeeding in school.

In later chapters, we describe evidence-based interventions and strategies that teachers can employ in inclusive classrooms as well as schoolwide interventions that can support teachers' efforts to foster and enhance social competence. While the strategies and interventions described would be of value in the education of all students—as befits a book devoted to ideas for use in inclusive classrooms—we pay particular attention to strategies and interventions that promise to address the needs of students with disabilities in those classrooms.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the variety of ways that social competence has been conceptualized and the student characteristics and behaviors through which social competence is displayed. This summary is meant to draw attention to the complexity of the concept we refer to as "social competence" throughout this book. Social competence can be conceptualized theoretically in a variety of ways, which plays out in interventions that are developed for use in elementary schools and classrooms. The remaining chapters are devoted to describing interventions that have promise, or a strong evidence base, for their use in inclusive elementary classrooms. In Chapter 3, we provide a summary of schoolwide approaches to bolstering social competence, while in Chapter 4, we address the question of "What is evidence-based practice?" and summarize a number social skill interventions appropriate for use in the general education classroom. In Chapter 5, we present effective forms of peer-mediated instruction and the elements of group work that are most closely associated with social benefits for students that teachers can weave into their instruction. In Chapter 6, we identify and describe a number of methods for assessing an individual student's social skills needs. To conclude, in Chapter 7, we outline components of evidence-based individual intervention plans, including a summary of strategies appropriate to use with individual students—those with particularly intractable or unique social skill difficulties—within an inclusive setting. It is our hope that this book will give educators ample ideas, strategies, and insights needed to continue to value, prioritize, and enhance the social competence of the students they serve.