



RESEARCH BRIEF #7

Social-Emotional Development of Dual Language Learners: A Critical Review of the Research

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to identify the state of knowledge about unique aspects of social-emotional development for dual language learners (DLLs) birth to 5 years of age. This review focused on three widely recognized dimensions of children's social-emotional development: (1) self-regulation which includes the ability to focus attention, manage emotions, and control behaviors; (2) social competence and social cognition which reflect the degree to which children are effective in their social interactions with others, and children's attributions regarding social relationships and interactions; and (3) problem behaviors which includes maladjustment in the development of self-regulation, social competence, and emotional expression.

For children growing up in a dual-language context, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may experience different expectations for social development when compared to monolingual children reared in U.S. mainstream culture. These different expectations and childrearing experiences could lead to different developmental outcomes with respect to regulation skills, social interactions and relationships for DLLs compared to monolingual children. This brief report is a summary of a systematic review of the research literature examining social-emotional trajectories of DLLs birth to age 5. The review presented a theoretical perspective highlighting the importance of features of the dual-language environment (including the multiple contexts of development and the amount and quality of exposure to each language) as well as a transactional systems model of social-emotional devel-

opment in which children learn social behavior through numerous and dynamic processes of social interactions and social relationships creating a link between individual development and culture. The review focused on peer-reviewed studies published in English-language journals from 2000-2011. An exhaustive search of the literature produced 15 articles that met the selection criteria methodology described below, and were analyzed with respect to research methods and study results.

Results

- 1. Findings across studies revealed no consistent pattern with respect to the social-emotional development of DLLs in comparison to that of non-DLLs.** Six of ten studies comparing the social-emotional development of DLLs and non-DLLs found no consistent differences between these groups (no differences: 6, 8, 12, 15; some similarities and some differences: 10, 14). Four other studies found group differences suggesting better social-emotional competence among DLL children (5, 7, 11, 13); however, the small effect sizes and limited empirical support for any single finding make it difficult to draw broad conclusions about these results.
- 2. Use of home language in the preschool setting may be associated with social-emotional functioning for DLLs.** A study of Spanish-speaking preschoolers found that use of Spanish in the classroom was associated with better frustration tolerance and social skills and lower levels of peer victimization(2). However, another study found that

having Spanish-speaking peers was not associated with quality of peer interactions in preschool (12).

- 3. Levels of bilingualism and English proficiency are linked to several findings. In particular, there are socio-emotional benefits to fluent bilingualism.** Although findings are difficult to interpret due to differing definitions of bilingualism and language dominance, the evidence seems to point to the value of fluency in both languages. Levels of fluency in English are associated with different trajectories of self-regulation for elementary-aged children: fluent bilingual Spanish speaking children had stronger task orientation and instruction-following skills at school entry than monolingual English or Spanish speakers (10, 11). There were mixed findings with respect to associations between English proficiency and problem behaviors. Bilingual children showed slower growth in behavior problems than monolingual English and Spanish speakers (10,11), but among Hispanic children another study found no effect of English proficiency on behavior problems (6). Among Cantonese-speaking preschoolers, those who were bilingual and attending English speaking preschools had higher sociolinguistic awareness than those attending Cantonese-speaking preschools (3).
- 4. DLL status is often highly correlated with other related demographic characteristics that are also commonly associated with social-emotional development, making it complicated to develop clear conclusions about the unique influence of DLL status.** Socioeconomic differences often account for much of the statistical differences found between linguistic subgroups. Family SES is associated with the level of parent-child communication, rates of internalizing

behaviors, children's participation in peer-oriented structured extracurricular activities, participation in child care, and the types of schools children attend (4, 5, 10, 11). DLL status and language proficiency explained much less of the variance in children's outcomes than socioeconomic status.

- 5. Immigrant status is another important characteristic: first generation immigrants tend to have fewer behavior problems and better approaches to learning and interpersonal skills than later-generation immigrants.** Four studies found that first generation immigrants had higher self-control and fewer behavior problems than later-generation immigrants (4, 5, 6, 7). However, some studies had conflicting results. Among Mexican heritage families, Mexican American girls used more emotion utterances in mother-child interactions than did Mexican American boys or Mexican immigrant boys and girls (1), indicating a significant interaction between gender and immigrant status. Another study found first generation Latino immigrants to have lower social competence than later generations (9). Finally, among immigrant families, the length of time in the U.S. was not related to children's social-emotional functioning (8).
- 6. Methodological issues limit the conclusions that can be drawn from research on the social-emotional development of DLLs.** The majority of studies focused on Spanish-speaking DLLs; therefore, the findings may not generalize to children from other language groups. Of the 15 studies, 9 relied on large-scale, multi-state or nationally representative datasets (2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14) and the remaining studies used local samples from across the United States. Many studies relied on adult report (from parents and/or teachers) to mea-

Method

The search parameters for this review included the following: published peer-reviewed journal articles from 2000–2011 and studies that included at least one direct child assessment or standardized ratings of DLL children's development prior to age 6. Search terms were defined in accordance with CECER-DLL guidelines and included terms related to dual language learners (dual language learner, English as a second language, limited English proficiency, English language learners) as well as terms related to social-emotional development (self-regulation, social competence, social cognition, and problem behaviors).

sure aspects of children’s social-emotional development, rather than collecting direct observations, potentially introducing a confound with cultural perceptions regarding development. Across all studies, definitions of DLL status and the method for determining it varied considerably. Of the 15 studies, 3 used a combination of indicators for defining DLL status (e.g., parent report, teacher report, standardized measures) (2, 6, 11), whereas the remaining 12 used a single indicator which varied across studies.

Conclusions

This review examined existing research on the social-emotional development of DLLs. Although the overarching conclusions about the social-emotional development of DLLs are limited by the small number of comparable studies, there are several findings that suggest important implications for promoting positive social-emotional development and warrant further research:

- The social-emotional competence of DLL children in preschool and elementary settings, indicated by measures such as frustration tolerance, task orientation, and self-control, may be higher than that of their monolingual peers, although there is insufficient research to disentangle the association of dual-language status with other characteristics such as immigrant status, heritage culture, and socioeconomic status.
- The use of the home language by early childhood educators within the classroom may have a positive effect on DLLs’ behavior regulation and also on the attitudes and behaviors of their English-speaking peers.
- There is evidence to suggest that becoming a fluent bilingual speaker has social-emotional benefits compared to being monolingual in either language.

The review also uncovered a number of methodological limitations in the studies reviewed, including the overreliance on adult report rather than direct observations of children’s development; the inconsistency in the definition and methods used to determine DLL status; and the finding that DLL status is frequently confounded with race, ethnicity, SES, and immigration status. The existing studies do not disentangle these factors. Also, because

studies do not track children’s language proficiency in their home language, it is not possible to connect important social-emotional milestones to a child’s overall dual-language development.

In addition to these methodological concerns, the review identified several gaps in the literature regarding the social-emotional development of DLLs, including the finding that there were few studies of infants and toddlers. In particular, despite a large literature on the long-term implications of secure attachment relationships in the first years of life, none of these studies of DLL development evaluated the security of children’s attachments to caregivers. Contextual issues of theoretical significance to the development of DLLs include ethnic identity and the loss of one’s home language, but neither of these was addressed in any of the identified studies.

These methodological concerns and research gaps point to several possible future research directions. Specifically, there is a pressing need to reach consensus on how to define and measure DLL status; advocate for the use of competency-based measures of children’s social-emotional development using culturally and linguistically appropriate measures; and generate longitudinal databases that permit the examination of developmental trajectories of social-emotional development among DLLs, beginning at birth. Future research should include infant-toddler samples followed longitudinally to examine the long-term effects of early social and linguistic experiences on social-emotional outcomes for DLL children. Future studies should take into consideration proficiency in both the home language and the second language and the associations between bilingual language development and ethnic identity. Such work should take into consideration not only the languages that are used in interacting with dual language learners, but also the extent to which other aspects of the child’s cultural heritage are acknowledged and supported, and how all of these factors collectively support children’s adjustment and positive relationships with others. ●

References of Studies Included in the Review

1. Cervantes, C. A. (2002). Explanatory emotion talk in Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 24*, 138-163.
2. Chang, F., Crawford, G., Early, D., Bryant, D., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., ... Pianta, R. (2007). Spanish-speaking children's social and language development in pre-kinder-garten classrooms. *Early Education and Development, 18*, 243-269.
3. Cheung, H., Mak, W. Y., Luo, X., & Xiao, W. (2010). Sociolinguistic awareness and false belief in young Cantonese learners of English. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 107*, 188-194.
4. Crosnoe, R. (2005). Double disadvantage or signs of resilience? The elementary school contexts of children from Mexican immigrant families. *American Education Research Journal, 42*(2), 269-303.
5. Crosnoe, R. (2007). Early child care and the school readiness of children from Mexican immigrant families. *International Migration Review, 41*, 151-182.
6. Dawson, B. A., & Williams, S. A. (2008). The impact of language status as an acculturative stressor on internalizing and externalizing behaviors among Latino/a children: A longitudinal analysis from school entry through third grade. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 37*, 399-411.
7. De Feyter, J. J., & Winsler, A. (2009). The early developmental competencies and school readiness of low-income immigrant children: Influences of generation, race/ethnicity, and national origins. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 24*, 411-431.
8. Farver, J. M., Xu, Y., Eppe, S., & Lonigan, C. J. (2006). Home environments and young Latino children's school readiness. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 21*, 196-212.
9. Galindo, C., & Fuller, B. (2010). The social competence of Latino kindergarteners and growth in mathematical understanding. *Developmental Psychology, 46*(3), 579-592.
10. Han, W. (2010). Bilingualism and socioemotional well-being. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 720-731.
11. Han, W., & Huang, C. C. (2010). The forgotten treasure: Bilingualism and Asian children's emotional and behavioral health. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(5), 831-838.
12. Howes, C., Wishard Guerra, A. G., Fuligni, A., Zucker, E., Lee, L., Obregon, N. B., & Spivak, A. (2011). Classroom dimensions predict early peer interaction when children are diverse in ethnicity, race, and home language. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26*, 399-408.
13. Luchtel, M., Hughes, K., Luze, G., Bruna, K. R., & Peterson, C. (2010). A comparison of teacher-rated classroom conduct, social skills, and teacher-child relationship quality between preschool English learners and preschool English speakers. *NHSA Dialog: A Research-to-Practice Journal for the Early Intervention Field, 13*(2), 92-111.
14. Rumberger, R. W., & Tran, L. (2006). Preschool participation and the cognitive and social development of language minority students. Technical report. Los Angeles: UCLA, CRESST.
15. Vaughan Van Hecke, A., Mundy, P. C., Francoise, C., Block, J.J., Delgado, C.E.F., Parlade, M.V., ... Pomares, Y.B. (2007). Infant joint attention, temperament, and social competence in preschool children. *Child Development, 78*(1), 53-69.

About CECER-DLL

CECER-DLL is a national center that is building capacity for research with dual language learners (DLLs) ages birth through five years. CECER-DLL aims to improve the state of knowledge and measurement in early childhood research on DLLs, identify and advance research on best practices for early care and education programming, and develop and disseminate products to improve research on DLLs. CECER-DLL is a cooperative agreement between the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children & Families (ACF), in collaboration with the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care.

Suggested citation

Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL; 2011). *Research brief #7. Social-emotional development in dual language learners: A critical review of the research*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author.

This brief summarizes results from a critical review of the literature sponsored by CECER-DLL conducted by a research team consisting of Tamara Halle, Jessica Vick Whittaker, Marlene Zepeda, Laura Rothenberg, Rachel Anderson, Julia Wessel, Virginia Buisse, and Dina Castro. The work was supported by a cooperative agreement funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Permission to copy, disseminate, or otherwise use information from this document for educational purposes is granted, provided that appropriate credit is given.

Additional Resources: For additional information regarding this research brief, see <http://cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu>

