A Mixed-Methods Study of the Social-Emotional Learning and the School Experience of Emergent Bilinguals

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As the number of immigrants steadily rises in the United States, our society has become culturally diverse, and the number of *Emergent Bilinguals* (EBs) continues to increase. EBs are students who acquire the English language through schooling and are also able to communicate using their native language (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reports an increase in the presence of EB students in public schools between 2000 and 2015, from an estimated 3.8 million (8.1%) to 4.8 million (9.5%), respectively. Despite this growing population, research on their experience of school is sorely lacking. *The proposed study aims to better understand the social-emotional competence and skills of EBs, in an attempt to identify how they can be better supported in our educational system. The current study addresses gaps in knowledge in its examination of teacher survey data and student qualitative data from a single low income, urban school.*

EBs encounter difficulties upon entering the educational system. For example, according to national data, a greater percentage of EBs attend high-poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). Students enrolled in 4th - 8th grade in high-poverty schools perform at lower levels in reading, mathematics, music, and visual arts, and are less likely to graduate in comparison to students enrolled in low poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). Thus, EBs in high poverty schools are at risk for low academic achievement.

The achievement gap between ethnic minority and white students in the U.S. has remained significant for the past several decades. EBs are a minority group themselves, who perform at lower levels than their fellow white peers and other minority groups. National reports on reading achievement show that EBs performed significantly lower when compared to non-EBs, and below the nationwide average reading score (McFarland et al., 2018). This discrepancy is even greater when comparing EBs' reading performance at higher levels of education; the

higher their grade, the lower their reading performance (McFarland et al., 2018). Following this

pattern of lower performance for EBs, in 2016, students who were born outside the U.S. had a

higher school dropout rate than students who were born in the U.S. (McFarland et al., 2018).

This pervasive academic underperformance is concerning especially considering that the EB

population is projected to increase in the next decades.

While there is research available on potential interventions to address the lack of

achievement in schools, there remains a gap in the literature regarding interventions specific to

EBs. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a promising reform that addresses the academic

underperformance in historically marginalized groups (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). SEL

emphasizes the need for teaching social-emotional skills to help students succeed in schools

(Cohen, 2006). A meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, which included a total of

270,034 K-12 students, suggested that individuals involved in SEL programs show positive

progress in their social and emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011). Moreover, these same students

had enhanced their academic performance by 11 percentile points (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL

addresses students' social emotional needs allowing them to perform better academically.

There is a substantial body of literature reporting on the positive effects of SEL, helping

students in increasing their academic engagement and performance, and reducing risks of

maladjustment (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2006). Nonetheless, the

literature about SEL and EBs is limited. More specifically, based on the current literature review,

there are no studies that have examined multiple components of SEL and EBs. According to my

literature search, there is only one study that has closely analyzed SEL and EBs. Castro-Olivo

(2014) adapted the SEL Strong Teens Program to make it a culturally sensitive program for

Latino EBs, further arguing that more research is needed to determine the validity and

effectiveness of SEL interventions with EBs. Although, SEL is a promising intervention in schools, there is paucity of research analyzing EBs' social-emotional needs. The current study asks:

1a. Compared to non-EBs, do EBs have lower academic achievement as measured by state standardized test exams?

1b. Do teachers perceive EBs as having poorer social-emotional competency than non-EBs, when accounting for academic achievement? Furthermore, compared to non- EBs, are social-emotional skills descriptively perceived differently in EBs?

2a. Based on focus groups, to what degree do EBs perceive positive and negative experiences associated with their EB status?

Methods

Data used for this study were obtained from the *Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character* (MOSAIC) project in its baseline year with middle school students. The current study leverages the MOSAIC's large scale data collection effort in a low income urban middle school in New Jersey. It draws on baseline data before the intervention began so MOSAIC is not a confound.

Procedures and Measures

Quantitative data for this study assesses teacher-reported social-emotional competency and achievement of middle school students based on statewide testing. In addition, I collected qualitative data through focus groups with EBs. The *Devereux Student Strengths Assessment* (DESSA)-Mini was used to measure the SEL construct. In addition, social-emotional skills will be analyzed descriptively by individually examining each question from the DESSA-Mini in relation to EB status. Furthermore, using student qualitative data we will capture how EBs themselves describe their experience in school. Using statistical techniques, we will analyze how

teacher report of student social-emotional competency and student self-reported school experience relate to their academic performance as compared to non-EBs.

Implications

The goal of this study is to better understand the academic and social-emotional needs of EBs. The current study aims to fill the gap in the literature by examining the relationship of social-emotional learning and EBs. In sum, this study seeks to bring awareness to the social-emotional needs of EBs as well as to offer implications for school-based interventions to improve the academic experience of EBs.

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