



## Bilingualism and socioemotional well-being

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### ABSTRACT

Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), this paper examines Latino children's socioemotional trajectories from kindergarten to fifth grade, paying particular attention to children's language proficiency. Results from the growth-curve analysis indicate that most Latino children who spoke a non-English language were doing as well as, if not better than, their White English Monolingual peers on socioemotional well-being. By fifth grade, Fluent Bilingual and Non-English-Dominant Bilingual children were surpassing every other group with the highest levels of approaches-to-learning, self-control, and interpersonal skills and the lowest levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. English-Dominant Bilingual children had similar levels and trajectories of socioemotional well-being as those of White English Monolingual children. Non-English Monolingual children, however, had the lowest self-control and interpersonal skills and the highest level of internalizing problems by fifth grade, as rated by their teachers.

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### 1. Introduction

Researchers and policymakers at both the national and local levels have focused much energy on children's academic performance, but less attention has been paid to another important aspect of well-being: socioemotional development. Children's socioemotional well-being, particularly during the early school years, is important in its own right and should not be overlooked by scholars. Children may have a difficult time learning to read if they have emotional and behavioral problems that distract them from academic learning (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Raver, 2002; Segal, 2006), and young children who struggle with reading and learning difficulties may grow increasingly frustrated and more disruptive (Raver, 2002).

Latino children, a rapidly growing ethnic group in the United States, often do not speak English at home. However, previous studies have found that youths of second generation and beyond tend not to preserve their parents' linguistic heritage (Portes & Hao, 1998). For these reasons, this paper examines the possible connection between bilingualism and children's socioemotional trajectories during their early school years. Results from these analyses suggest that policymakers should view bilingualism as a strength that can be fostered and encouraged in their efforts to promote children's success in school. Building upon previous research on bilingualism (Portes & Hao, 1998, 2002, 2004) as well as on effective-school literature (Rutter & Maughan, 2002), this study controls for a large set of child, family, and school characteristics in order to assess the net effects of

language proficiency on children's socioemotional trajectories, paying particular attention to the effects of school environments.

#### 1.1. The importance of language

What does language capacity have to do with a child's social development? The early school years are a pivotal time when children are in a new, more advanced stage of cognitive development. Young students confront issues of social comparison and competition on a larger scale than they have likely experienced before (Eccles, 1999). This may be felt more acutely by English Language Learners (ELLs), who may feel more isolated and be more likely to receive "failure feedback" from their peers and teachers if they are unable to communicate well with them (Olsen, 1997). In addition, the introduction to the school environment may represent ELL children's first nonfamilial social environment as well as their first time in a different cultural environment. The negative effects of social comparison and failure feedback may have unique implications for children who are beginning to see their own cultural identities as different from those of their peers. ELL children may feel particularly discouraged and insecure around their fluent classmates. Young children who are rejected by their peers in their early years of schooling face the grave risk of lower academic achievement, a greater likelihood of grade retention and/or dropping out of school, and a greater risk of delinquency and of committing juvenile offenses in adolescence (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Raver, 2002; Richman, Stevenson, & Graham, 1986; Rose, Rose, & Feldman, 1989; Vitaro, Laroque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001).

If language proficiency is an obstacle for ELL children, then it follows that English-only instruction could be the optimal way to

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improve these students' communication capacity and avoid language failure feedback. However, more than two decades of research have documented the benefits of being bilingual, including higher academic performance (e.g., Golash-Boza, 2005; Portes & Hao, 1998, 2002, 2004; Portes & McLeod, 1999; Portes & Schauflyer, 1994), higher self-esteem (e.g., Portes & Hao, 2002), and stronger family cohesion (e.g., Portes & Hao, 2002; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). Some scholars have linked bilingualism with greater cognitive flexibility and abstract thinking skills (Bialystok, 1988; Duncan & De Avilla, 1979; Rumbaut, 1995; Willig, 1985), while other researchers have examined the access that bilingual children have to positive "cultural capital" in their ethnic families and communities (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1994, 1998). These results challenge the notion that a rapid shift to monolingual English fluency is best for children's success.

Unfortunately, research has found that early generation children of immigrants tend to have stronger academic performance, better health, and more positive behavior than their native-born peers, these trends tend not to sustain through each subsequent generation. Scholars have attributed this phenomenon to the possibility that as children become more Americanized, they lose the protective effect of their parents' culture, which usually puts great emphasis on the value of education and respect for family members (Rumbaut, 1994). Moreover, with each generation, children in immigrant families become increasingly reluctant to speak the mother tongue of their parents or grandparents.

### 1.2. *The importance of the school environment*

Family background, of course, plays a significant role in shaping children's experiences and developmental trajectories. This does not, however, attenuate the importance of the school in cultivating children's optimal achievement, especially ELL children, whose feelings and actions are almost certainly affected by the language feedback that they receive from their teachers and peers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Raver, 2002). As one example, children may not be motivated to speak their parent's language if few of their peers and teachers speak the language or if they are not given the opportunity to use their language at school. Therefore, children may not practice their family's native language despite their parents' encouragement to do so. On the other hand, the opportunity to gain English proficiency at school is vital for children who are exposed to a limited-English environment at home. Although these two issues seem contradictory, the message is the same: children's experiences and developmental trajectories, particularly those of ELL children, do not solely depend on family background but on the school environment as well.

Segmented assimilation theory postulates that the various paths taken by immigrants and their children depend not only on their family characteristics and reasons for migrating, but also on the neighborhoods in which they settle and the corresponding resources afforded to them (Portes & Zhou, 1993). For ELL students, the resources available at school supplement a family's resources to allow children to enjoy an optimal learning environment. The school can also play an important role in helping children retain their ethnic identity (i.e., by maintaining or improving proficiency in the native language) so that they can achieve selective acculturation, which, in theory, allows children to benefit from the strengths of both the U.S. culture and their home culture (Portes & Hao, 2002).

In general, of course, well-run schools have much to offer students. The consensus in the effective-school literature is that students' socioemotional well-being increases when they attend schools with strong administrative leadership; adequate resources (e.g., funding); efforts made to improve partnerships between the home and school; a safe and orderly school environment; professional development activities for teachers and services for families; and classrooms

organized as learning environments staffed by well-qualified teachers and aides (Bennett, Elliott, & Peters, 2005; Borman & Overman, 2004; Griffith, 2002; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). For example, studies have observed that at schools in which the principal provides strong leadership including a strategic vision, staff participation with shared vision and goals, and an effective home-school partnership, students have better well-being in general and stronger academic performance in particular (Bennett et al., 2005; Borman & Overman, 2004; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). Further, prior research indicates that a safe and orderly school atmosphere reaffirms the types of positive social behaviors that resilient children often possess (Smith & Carlson, 1997; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). Providing age-appropriate, clearly conveyed expectations and making concerted efforts to communicate with parents about children's learning process and curriculum are important features of fostering school effectiveness (Rutter & Maughan, 2002).

Unfortunately, studies have found that schools serving low-income, minority, immigrant, and ELL children can jeopardize students' well-being by failing to provide a supportive school climate—mainly by institutionalizing low academic expectations, having inadequate educational resources, and suffering from high levels of teacher and administrative turnover (Borman & Overman, 2004; Griffith, 2002, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Valencia, 2000). Students' socioemotional well-being might also suffer in schools where teachers have fewer positive (or more negative) interactions with students from low-income families or in schools with a high concentration of minority or poverty-stricken students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2004). This possibility is alarming because the teacher-child relationship is a salient marker of the socioemotional processes involved in academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Further, children who are vulnerable in some way, such as having limited English, are likely to be influenced more than other children by their experiences in school contexts (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998).

In addition to the factors that are important to foster effective schools, the type of language instruction provided by the schools is important in helping ELL students improve their overall English proficiency and communicate better with teachers and peers. The communication skills of ELL children may, in turn, have profound implications for their adaptation to the school environment and thus their socioemotional well-being. In an effort to improve the English-language abilities of children of immigrants, schools have implemented both English-only and bilingual instruction approaches. Recent research suggests that programs combining both the child's native language and English need to be implemented for at least 6 to 8 years for their long-term beneficial effects on ELL students' school performance to become apparent (Collier & Thomas, 2004). In practice, transitional or remedial language programs designed to move ELL students into English-only instruction are more prevalent (Zehler et al., 2003). The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which holds public schools accountable for the academic performance of ELL students, has only amplified this trend. This act requires ELL students to take standardized tests in English within 3 years of entering the school system. English-only services, however, run the risk of shifting ELL children to English monolingualism at the expense of developing their native language abilities. In contrast, bilingual instruction ideally supports the simultaneous development of both English and the native language (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cziko, 1992; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1997; Olsen, 1997). To the extent that bilingualism is related to children's academic outcomes, these programs could have very different influences on children's development.

More importantly, whether a school provides an environment that supports optimal socioemotional development largely depends upon the continuity and stability of that environment (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). For example, a well-designed bilingual program may not fully promote children's well-being if students only receive the instruction

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