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. The review focused on studies comparing DLLs to non-DLLs and the identification of relational and contextual factors that might contribute to the social-emotional well-being and development of DLLs such as the quality of relationships with parents and other caregivers, the support of children's home language and culture, and the role of positive adjustment and identity formation.

This brief report is a summary of a systematic review of the research literature examining the literature on social-emotional trajectories of DLLs birth to 5. The review focused on peer-reviewed studies published in the U.S. from 2000-2010. An exhaustive search of the literature produced 13 articles that were analyzed with respect to research methods and study results as described below.

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.** Four of nine studies comparing the social-emotional development of DLLs and non-DLLs found no differences between these groups (3, 9, 10, 13). Five other studies found group differences favoring DLL children; however, the small effect sizes and limited empirical support for any single finding make it difficult to draw broad conclusions about these results. Specifically, teachers rated their relationships with DLL children as closer and as having fewer conflicts compared to non-DLLs (6, 11), and they reported fewer behavior problems and greater social competence for DLLs than non-DLLs (4, 8, 12).

2. **There was insufficient research on how factors such as immigration status or language exposure affect the social-emotional development of DLLs.** Only a few studies investigated factors such as immigration status and exposure to English at home or in the classroom that could influence the social-emotional development of DLLs (1, 2, 5, 7). The results were inconclusive due to inconsistencies across studies with respect to the samples, the focus on various aspects of social-development, and measurement of a wide range of developmental outcomes (e.g., emotion utterances, task orientation, frustration tolerance, social skills, assertiveness, internalizing and externalizing behaviors).

3. **Methodological issues further 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 13 studies, 10 relied on large-scale, multi-state or nationally representative datasets (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) and the remaining studies used local samples from across the United States. Five studies used a longitudinal design (2, 3, 9, 10, 13). Across all studies, definitions of DLL status and the method for determining it varied considerably. Of the 13 studies, 3 used a combination of indicators for defining DLL status (e.g., parent report, teacher report, standardized measures) (2, 5, 10), whereas 10 used a single indicator (e.g., parent report) (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13).

Conclusions

This review examined existing research on the social-emotional development of DLLs and determined that there were few conclusions or unique patterns of development that could be identified on the basis of this research. The review also uncovered a number of methodological limitations in the studies reviewed, including the over-reliance 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. 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 and no studies evaluating the security of children's attachments to caregivers, nor were there any studies that examined issues of ethnic identity and the loss of one's home language. 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; and generate longitudinal databases that permit the examination of developmental trajectories of social-emotional development among DLLs, beginning at birth. 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. ●

Method

The search parameters for this review included the following: published peer-reviewed journal articles from 2000–2010 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).

References of Studies Included in the Review

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