



Socioemotional Skills and the Achievement Gap

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SUMMARY

This study is a novel examination of two issues that have recently attracted significant popular and scholarly attention: (1) the importance of socioemotional skills (such as grit, growth mindset, engagement, and anger regulation) in enabling learning; and (2) the academic achievement gap between ethnic minority and non-minority students.

The study addressed two questions. First, which socioemotional skills are most predictive of literacy achievement? Second, are the socioemotional skills that are predictive of literacy different for minority and non-minority students?

This study suggests that *while several socioemotional skills are independently predictive of literacy, grit is the strongest predictor. Likewise, grit is most predictive of literacy for minority students. In contrast, engagement is the most predictive of literacy for non-minority students.* Understanding these differences may help educators design culturally-informed, data-based interventions that better address the achievement gap.

BACKGROUND

- The racial achievement gap is a widespread problem in American public schools (e.g., Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011).
- Socioemotional skills are generally linked to academic success, and many schools view socioemotional skills as a potential tool for ameliorating the achievement gap. (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum, 2012). Yet, While many schools implement socioemotional interventions, they do not choose them systematically (Cohen, 2015).
- NASP recommends a strengths-based approach to research and practice, rather than focusing on student deficits (NASP, 2009). The current study takes a strengths-based approach in examining the relationship between four socioemotional skills (grit, growth mindset, engagement, and anger regulation) and academic achievement, with a particular focus on the importance of different socioemotional skills for different groups of students.

OBJECTIVES

This is an exploratory study examining the relation between four socioemotional skills (grit, growth mindset, engagement, and anger regulation) and literacy achievement among minority and non-minority students. Specifically:

- Which socioemotional skills best predict success in elementary school?
- Does the predictive strength of these skills differ based on ethnicity?

Participants

Students

- 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade public school students
- N = 267; 36% ethnic minority.
- All demographic groups had similar numbers of students qualified for free or reduced lunch ($\leq 5\%$ - 8%). There were similar rates of poverty in both minority and white subgroups.

Teachers

- 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers served as cross informants on students' grit and engagement.

METHODS

Data Collection

- Conducted student interviews with the following scales:

- Short Grit Scale, Grit-S
- Growth Mindset: Helpless vs. Mastery-Oriented Responses to Failure
- Emotional Engagement Scale
- Emotion Regulation Measure (Expressions of Anger or Frustration)

- Literacy achievement performance task (Test of Silent Reading Efficiency and Comprehension -"TOSREC")

Analysis

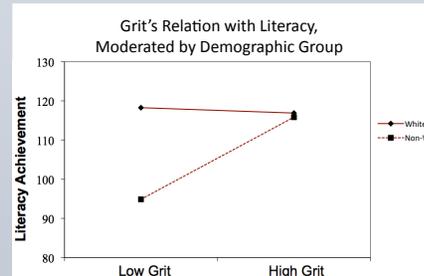
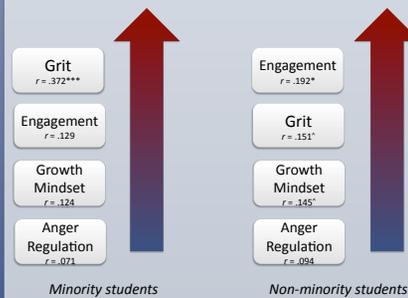
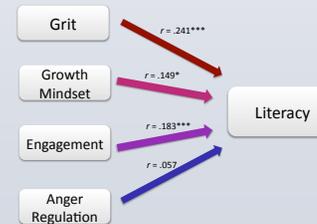
- Data was analyzed via correlations and simple/multiple linear regression

RESULTS

For the full school sample, grit was the factor that was most predictive of literacy, followed by engagement^o and growth mindset.

Results differed, however, when examining minority and non-minority students separately.

- For non-minority students, engagement was the only significant correlate of literacy.
- For minority students, grit was the only significant correlate.



CONCLUSIONS

- Findings are consistent with past research on ethnic minority students and their unique challenges in school (e.g., Hernandez, 2004; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Additionally, students from different cultures experience different motivators and reinforcements for school achievement (Pew Research Center, 2015).
- In elementary school, it may be ethnic minority students' grit that shapes their success, above their engagement in class material.
- This clarification may be especially useful at the current time, when socioemotional curricula are often driven by fads and short-lived media frenzy (Cohen, 2015).
- Researchers and practitioners must identify culturally specific and relevant socioemotional skills to target in closing the achievement gap. The current study may provide useful guidance to schools considering which socioemotional skills to teach.

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^o = Approaching significance; * ≤ 0.05 ; *** ≤ 0.001

^o The full sample's grit and engagement correlations are based on teacher report. Results were similar with student report.