



Research Brief:

Do Social and Emotional Skills Help Predict End of Year English Language Achievement?

Introduction

It is well-established that students' foundational reading skills measured at the beginning of a school year are highly predictive of students' end of year achievement. The strength of this research has informed state policies that require schools to screen students' reading skills in early grades so that additional instruction can be provided to struggling students. Although reading skills serve as an important predictor, other factors, including social and emotional competence (SEC) can also account for differences in student performance.

Social and emotional competence includes constructs such as optimistic thinking, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEC has been shown to be strongly correlated with academic performance. Several meta-analyses indicate that students who receive social and emotional instruction show improved attitudes toward school, enhanced social behaviors, and higher academic performance, including reading proficiency.

As student reading achievement has lagged following the pandemic, educators continue to report that strengthening students' social and emotional skills is a priority in their schools. A combined focus on SEC and foundational reading skills creates a robust framework for determining the type of instructional support students need to be successful. For example, when students learn to manage their emotions and behaviors, they are better equipped to persist through challenging reading tasks, use effective strategies, and engage in classroom activities. Furthermore, strong reading skills can reduce frustration and increase students' self-efficacy.

Although SEC is a critical factor in student achievement, few schools are equipped to use multiple sources of data to inform instructional decision making. In this study, we investigated whether SEC, as measured by the DESSA 2 added predictive value to end-of-year reading achievement beyond that provided by a traditional reading screener. This study had two main objectives:

1. Assess if DESSA 2 enhances the predictive power of a reading screener in identifying students at risk for poor English Language Arts (ELA) outcomes
2. Provide illustrative cases to help educators understand the combined use of these screening tools



Methods

Participants. This study included 175 third-grade students (51% female) from three schools in Idaho. The demographics of the sample included 6% Black, 6% Two or More Races, 55% White, 2% Pacific Islander, 7% Asian, 18% Hispanic, 2% Middle Eastern, 4% Missing. 6% spoke a language other than English at home, and 14% received special education services.

Measures

1. Social Emotional Competence was measured by the DESSA 2, which evaluates SEC with 40 items across six competencies and reports T-scores (mean = 50; higher scores indicate higher SEC).
2. Reading skills were screened with the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), a reading screener that assesses comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and reports percentile scores categorized into three tiers.
3. End of Year English Language Arts (ELA) Achievement was measured by the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). The ISAT is an end of year assessment of ELA skills, with scores reported in four levels, where Levels 1 & 2 indicate below grade level, and Levels 3 & 4 indicate at/above grade level.

Analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analyses were used to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1 reports the correlations, means, and standard deviations of the study variables. As is shown, the correlation between IRI and ISAT is strong, and the correlation between DESSA 2 and the academic measures is moderate.

Table 1. Correlations and descriptives

	DESSA 2	IRI	ISAT
DESSA 2	1.00		
IRI	.335*	1.00	
ISAT	.339*	.697*	1.00
Mean (SD)	51.06 (8.89)	518.26 (57.04)	2450 (79.35)

Note. All correlations significant, $p < .01$

Table 2 presents the results of the stepwise regression analyses, where ISAT ELA scores were the outcome variable, and IRI and DESSA 2 entered as the predictive variables. As is shown, IRI scores account for 48% of the variance in ISAT scores, and DESSA 2 scores accounted for an additional 1.2% of the variance.

Table 2. Regression analysis

Model	R	Adj. R Square	Std Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Sig
1	.697	.486	57.071	.486	<.001
2	.706	.493	56.543	.012	.041

a. Predictors: IRI Overall Reading Score

b. Predictors: IRI Overall Reading Score, DESSA 2 score

Practical Implications

The regression analyses support using both IRI and DESSA 2 to help predict students' end of year ISAT ELA performance. However, teachers will need a more practical approach to interpreting data. The following student profiles illustrate how screening data from multiple sources can be used to inform instructional supports. The profiles were selected from the data set and represent actual student performance.

Student A: This student has a high IRI score (86th percentile) and a low DESSA 2 score (37) and did not meet grade-level standards on the ISAT. This student may have benefited from instructional support to develop their self-management and relationship skills, as these were the two lowest rated skills on the DESSA 2 for this student.

Student B: This student has a low IRI score (28th percentile) and a typical DESSA 2 score (57) and met grade-level standards. This student's greatest strengths are in social awareness and responsible decision making. Leveraging these strengths by assigning this student to work with others with stronger reading skills is one way to support continued achievement.

Student C: This student has low scores on both IRI (21st percentile) and DESSA 2 (38) and did not meet grade-level standards. This student's greatest areas of need are in self-management and optimistic thinking. Teaching this student strategies to persevere through challenges, to regulate their emotions and behavior, and providing this student with opportunities to feel successful may promote stronger reading growth.

Conclusion

This study provides support for screening both foundational reading skills and SEC. Limitations of the study include a small, geographically limited sample. Further research with larger, more diverse populations across different academic areas is needed to generalize findings. As illustrated by the profiles, for some students, social and emotional skills can 'make or break' students' achievement. The combined use of academic and SEC measures can better inform and direct instructional interventions, promoting a holistic approach to student development.

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