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ASSESSING THE PROTECTIVE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL BELONGING AGAINST THE RISK OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

An Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for Graduation with

Undergraduate Research Honors

Georgia State University

2011

by

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Date

ASSESSING THE PROTECTIVE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL BELONGING AGAINST THE RISK OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

by

CHRISTOPHER M. BARCLAY

Under the Direction of Drs. Chris Henrich and Scott Weaver

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted among a sample of Korean American students to investigate the potential moderation of the risks related to English proficiency by the protection of school belonging. Perceived scholastic competence, self-reported school grades, and academic expectancies were used for dependent variables. It was hypothesized that students with higher sense of belonging would be less affected by English proficiency than their peers with lower sense of belonging. The risk of English proficiency was confirmed. However, school belonging did not have as much of an effect as expected and students with higher English proficiency seemed to gain more benefit from increased school belonging. This finding reminds educators of the pressing importance of English proficiency, and future research is suggested to investigate the unique effects of belonging among students of Korean, and perhaps other Asian, backgrounds.

INDEX WORDS: Korean American, immigrants, students, school belonging, English proficiency, perceived scholastic competence, school grades, academic expectancies

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Science

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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Throughout history, immigration trends consistently rank high among American political issues. However, those who are arguably most affected by immigration, the children of immigrants, are often overlooked. Today they cannot be ignored, as one of every five American children has a foreign born parent (US Bureau of the Census, 2010). Also recently, research efforts have moved past exploration of differences between pan-ethnic groups and towards the analysis of variation within those groups. Researchers are reaching a greater understanding of the unique experiences of specific ethnic groups. Rather than categorizing minority populations as Asian or Latino, more specific and accurate identities are being recognized. This progress has been very helpful in removing ignorance towards the complex diversity of experiences among Asian American students. More specifically, progress is being made past previous ignorance of the two spectra of generational status and national lineage.

Past (and current) research that unified Asian American students as a minority or a homogenous group of immigrants perpetuated the "model minority" stereotype of high achievers. This approach ignored many of the issues that are pressing for immigrant students. For example, children of Asian immigrants display higher math scores and higher educational aspirations than children of native-born parents of Asian descent (Kao &Tienda, 1995). However, these aspirations might not be as easily attainable as children of immigrant parents may tend to have less proficiency in English than their peers with native-born parents.

Of particular interest among some researchers is the Korean American population, as Korean Americans display preferences for the identities of 'Korean' or 'Korean American' and are relatively adverse to the 'Asian' or 'Asian American' identities (Lee, 2009). However, it is unknown how distinct this group is, and there is growing evidence that acculturation and socioeconomic factors impact the group's homogeneity (Lew, 2006). For an even more accurate

picture of the academic experiences of Korean American children in schools, it is important for research to investigate the numerous factors that might influence their expectations, confidence, and performance. There is an abundance of evidence showing that English proficiency and school belonging are two of these important factors. This study attempts to further the research on their influences and how they interact with each other in students' perceptions and performance.

The risk of English proficiency in school

According to Masten (2001), when the evidence surrounding a condition is statistically associated with a higher probability of an undesired future outcome, it is considered a risk factor. One risk factor that threatens immigrant children from almost all backgrounds is English proficiency, for both the children and their parents. In a qualitative study of struggling immigrant students and their families (Bhattacharya, 2000), parents reported that the largest obstacle to their interaction with the educational system as a whole was language differences.

In correlational studies, English proficiency has been found to be related to student performance, teacher evaluations of students, student confidence and expectations, and social experiences. Researchers examining data from the five-year Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study of children with backgrounds from Asia, the Carribean, and Latin America found a positive relationship between English proficiency and class grades (Bang, Suarez-Orozco, Pakes, & O'Connor, 2009). Students' confidence and expectations are also boosted by their English abilities, for English proficiency is positively related to planning to attend college and negatively related to planning to work immediately after high school (Ma &Yeh, 2010).

Outside of the classroom, students' English abilities seem to influence their social reception. According to one study, Chinese students' lack of English proficiency in middle school predicted the presence of an accent in high school. The presence of an accent, in turn, predicted having a "perpetual foreigner stereotype," which increased self-reported discrimination experiences among peers. These experiences significantly increased depressive symptoms among the students (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011). In summary, a growing body of evidence points to the risks that English proficiency poses for immigrant and minority students in the areas of parental involvement, academic performance, future expectations, and school social settings.

The Protection of School Belonging

While Bhattacharya's study (2000) provided qualitative evidence that language barriers hinder parents from being involved, nine out of ten of the immigrant children involved in the study viewed their teachers as helpful, noticing the teachers' readiness to reiterate lessons in simple language for them. While the parents shared some of the same disadvantages that the children did, the strong support from the teachers could potentially mitigate the burden on the parents. However, this support cannot always be expected, as schools vary in the learning environments, teaching curriculum and strategies that they provide. There are many contributing factors to providing a positive atmosphere for students. Some schools may have personnel that are relatively more prepared than their peers to assist immigrant children and student bodies vary in their ethnic diversity.

According to Goodenow (1993), students' sense of belonging in school is the degree to which students, in the school social environment, feel personally recognized, supported, included, and appreciated by others. School belonging has consistently been found to be a

bipolar dimension, which according to Masten (2001), is a variable associated with positive outcomes at the higher end of its range and with negative outcomes at the lower end. The construct was originally developed by Goodenow (1993) to aid in detecting students at-risk for dropping out of high school. Goodenow found that recently transferred students and ethnic minorities scored significantly lower than their peers. Behaviorally, a low sense of belonging is associated with both internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). In a study by Kenny et al. (2003), students with a low sense of belonging also tended to expect barriers to their education (i.e. family, financial, and social barriers to college attendance) and their career (i.e. racial/ethnic and gender discrimination).

Although a low sense of belonging is related to negative outcomes, a high level of school belonging has been found to be protective. A study of over 12,000 adolescents in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found school connectedness to be protective against several risk factors such as emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, and violent behaviors. It was also predictive of less substance use (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana) and a delay in sexual debut (Resnick, et. al., 1997). Academically, the sense of belonging scale is significantly correlated with expectations of success, valuing schoolwork, teacher ratings of effort, school attendance measures, and GPA (Goodenow, 1993).

Many studies have also provided evidence that school social environments have similar effects on minority populations such as Latino adolescents and students with limited English proficiency. When accounting for English proficiency and generational status, English as a Second Language (ESL) students tend to benefit more from their ESL placement in schools that have a higher ESL concentration (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2008). Among Latino adolescents, school belonging has been found to be related to future expectations (Ibanez,

Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004), perceived competence and school grades (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jiminez, 2008). In the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (children of Mexican-born parents living in San Diego), students that indicated a positive perception of their school environment retained higher GPAs and were less likely to be enrolled in remedial programs and drop-out (Stone & Han, 2005).

Current Study

Considering the risk that limited English proficiency poses for students' success and the protection that a sense of belonging can provide, it is expected that youth with limited English proficiency might gain the confidence and expectations needed to perform well if they have a stronger sense of belonging to their schools. Based on the findings of previous studies, it is expected that English proficiency will display a negative relationship with expectations, confidence, and self-reported school grades in a sample of Korean-American adolescents.

School belonging is also expected to have a positive relationship with the same outcome variables, as well as a moderating effect on the aforementioned relationships. That is, English proficiency is expected to be less predictive of expectations, confidence, and performance among students with a higher sense of school belonging. A strong sense of belonging may not necessarily improve students' English proficiency directly, but it could provide them assurance that the appropriate assistance will be provided. This comfort would weaken the negative relationships that English proficiency is expected to have on expectations and confidence.

Appropriate assistance to students may be very simple, as suggested in Bhattacharya's study (2000). The measure of teacher support was a subjective student report, as the vast majority of the students only *believed* that their teachers were helpful and mentioned ways that they were helpful. More objective measures of teachers' actual practices were not utilized in this

study. Similar to the mentioned study, a student report might be even more revealing, as it could be a function of both practices and their reception. Also, if students have a sense of belonging among their peers, they may be more likely to receive homework help, informal English lessons, and encouragement from them as well. These experiences would thus increase their confidence and expectations for the future, buffering against the effects of a limited English proficiency.

To assess students' confidence, outlook, and overall performance, outcome variables for the purpose of this study included perceived scholastic competence (Harter, 1982), academic expectations (Murdock, 1999), and self-reported school grades.

It is expected that low English proficiency is negatively associated with students' competence, expectations, and grades, while students' sense of belonging is positively related to the same variables. It is also expected that the effects of low English proficiency on students' competence, expectations, and grades are moderated by sense of belonging. That is, students with a higher sense of belonging will be less affected by the risks of low English proficiency.

Method

Participants

One hundred four Korean American adolescents in the metro Atlanta area were recruited, with 58.7% born in Korea. Ages of the participants ranged from fifteen years to eighteen years, with a median of 17 years (SD =1.45), and 43.6% were female. Most participating youth were high school students (94%) of medium to high socio-economic status, as only 17.6% reported receiving free or reduced priced lunch. Most students were enrolled in Gwinnett or Fulton county schools (46% and 41% respectively), and only a small minority (3%) was enrolled in private school. A slight majority of the students (54.7%) were in the 11th or 12th grade (range 8th – 12th), and only 4.2% were enrolled in middle school.

Procedures

Participants were recruited in the metro Atlanta area by word of mouth, with the support of local churches, youth events, community centers, and families. Announcements were made at the close of church services and at intermissions during youth events (i.e. half-time of basketball games). Recruited youth over age eighteen were given consent forms and those under age were given assent forms. Adolescents under 18 would either obtain parental permission immediately or would take it home and return it at the next event or church service. All surveys were completed on laptop computers either at the family's house, church hall, or a community recreation center. It is important to note that all surveys were administered during the summer, so almost all students were probably away from school when participating. Surveys were available in both English and Korean, and bilingual speakers were consulted to ensure accuracy of translation and back-translation. However, all participants elected to take the survey in English. Each participant was given a $15 incentive for involvement.

Measures

Self-report measures of English proficiency were gathered from the mean of four items ("How well do you speak/read/write/understand English?"), with answers on a five-point scale ranging from *very poorly* to *very well* ($\alpha = .98$). While an actual English proficiency assessment may seem more valid for students, a self-report measure is more efficient and incorporates relevant affective constructs. Research has shown that self-report of language proficiency is actually a function of both actual language proficiency and relevant anxiety. Those who report high language use anxiety tend to underestimate their abilities while those who report low anxiety were biased towards overestimating their abilities over their actual proficiency (MacIntyre, Noels, &Clëment, 1997). Given the social implications of English proficiency in the

school setting (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011), this approach to assessing proficiency may be inclusive of confidence factors and thus more appropriate for the academic setting.

An adapted scale of Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership was used to measure sense of belonging. The mean was calculated of items including "Most teachers at my school are interested in me," "I wish I were in a different school," and "The teachers here respect me." The four responses available ranged from *not at all true* to *very true* ($\alpha = .66$).

Participants' academic expectations were assessed with a scale adapted from Murdock's (1999) Economic Value of Education Scale. Items included "I plan to go to college" and "I think I could be successful in life without an education" and five responses were available, ranging from *agree* to *disagree* ($\alpha = .70$). The cognitive subscale within Harter's (1982) Perceived Competence Scale was adapted to create a scale relevant to academic competence ($\alpha = .65$). The used scale comprised of items such as "I feel that I am pretty intelligent" and "I have trouble figuring out the answers in school." Available responses ranged from *not at all true* to *very true*. School grades were self-reported in their most recent English, mathematics, science, and social science courses, and conventional letter grades were available as responses [A(90-100), B(80-89), C(74-79), D(70-73), and F(69 or below)] ($\alpha = .65$).

Multiple Imputation

To minimize response burden in a comprehensive survey, three multiple forms were created and randomly assigned to participating youth; thus the data are assumed to be missing completely at random. Multiple imputation can be a valid procedure for addressing missing data with minimal loss in statistical power, if the assumption of random missing data is met (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Based upon existing data, multiple values are imputed for each missing data

point, thereby generating multiple data sets. For this study, 20 imputed data sets were generated using SPSS Missing Values module, each with different imputed values.

Analyses of interest were conducted on all 20 data sets and estimates of parameters and standard errors were aggregated using SPSS in a manner that accounts for the uncertainty in imputed values. Using multiple imputation thus simultaneously increases both statistical power relative to complete data methods but does involve larger standard errors compared to the case where there are no missing data. When appropriate for participants, unplanned missing data from uncompleted surveys and unanswered items was imputed as well and the validity rests upon the assumption that missingness is at random (Schafer & Graham, 2002; S. Weaver, personal communication, December 2, 2011).

Results

Low English Proficiency Variable

A majority of the participants (65%) reported the maximum score (5.00) on the English proficiency scale. After finding a bimodal distribution for the English proficiency scale and considering the traditional method used by school systems in identifying a threshold for ESL placement, a median-split was conducted on the variable. When the median of English proficiency (5.00) was used to dichotomize the variable, two groups were created: high English proficiency (EP = 5.00) and low English proficiency (EP < 5.00). The new variable was labeled Low English Proficiency, as participants in the high proficiency group were assigned a 0 and those in the group with lower proficiency were assigned a 1 for the variable.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

All descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 1. While age and gender correlated, neither was significantly correlated with any of the independent or dependent

variables of interest. Low English proficiency was negatively correlated with both academic expectancies and grades. This correlation indicates that both expectations and grades are relatively lower among students with low English proficiency, but perceived scholastic competence was not related to English proficiency. However, students' school belonging was positively correlated with competence. Also, perceived scholastic competence correlated positively with self-reported school grades.

Table 1

Descriptive and Reliability Statistics of Predictors and Outcomes

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	α
Low English proficiency	0.35	0.48	0	1	0.98
School belonging	2.81	0.60	1.40	4.13	0.66
Perceived scholastic competence	2.97	0.70	1.28	4.74	0.65
Academic expectancies	3.60	0.91	1.00	5.00	0.70
School grades	4.41	0.56	2.75	5.00	0.65

Table 2

Correlations of Age, Gender, Predictors, and Outcomes

	Age	Gender	LEP	Belonging	Competence	Grades
Expectancies	- .089	- .042	-.264**	.023	.148	- .006
Grades	- .103	- .080	-.229*	.170	.385**	
Competence	.057	- .133	- .157	.266*		
Belonging	.157	.044	- .053			
LEP	.041	.094				
Gender	.219*					

Note. LEP = Low English Proficiency

† * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3

Linear Regression Analyses of Low English Proficiency & School Belonging

	Competence			Grades			Expectancies		
Predictor	β	SE	p	β	SE	P	β	SE	P
Step 1									
LEP	- .272	.155	.081	- .274	.123	.025*	- .531	.248	.034*
Belonging	.275	.137	.048*	.160	.101	.114	.030	.208	.886
Step 2									
LEP x SB	- .174	.293	.554	- .083	.216	.700	- .809	.434	.064

Note. LEP = Low English Proficiency, SB = Sense of Belonging

† * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

Preliminary Results

Linear Regression

Main effects and moderation were analyzed with linear hierarchical regression. Given that neither age nor gender correlated with the independent variable or moderator, they were not used as covariates. In the first step, regression analysis was conducted on the main effects of the independent variable (low English proficiency) and the moderator (school belonging). For the second step of investigating moderation effects, analysis was conducted with the addition of the interaction term. The interaction term was calculated by multiplying the independent variable by a mean centered moderator. The moderator of school belonging was mean centered by decreasing the scores by the mean score, shifting the mean to zero. Separate regressions were conducted for each outcome variable. Results are presented in Table 3 and summarized below.

Scholastic competence. Low English proficiency did not predict perceived scholastic competence ($p = 0.81$). However, students' report of school belonging was positively related to perceived scholastic competence at a level of significance ($p = .048$). The interaction between low English proficiency and school belonging was not statistically significant ($p = .554$).

School grades. Low English proficiency was negatively associated with school grades ($p = .027$), revealing that students with low English proficiency had relatively lower performance. School belonging was not significantly related to self-reported school grades ($p = .129$). The interaction between low English proficiency and school belonging was not statistically significant ($p = .700$).

Academic expectancies. Low English proficiency was negatively associated with students' academic expectancies. ($p = .034$), indicating that students with low English proficiency had comparatively lower academic expectancies. However, reports of school

belonging were not significantly related to academic expectancies (p = .225). The interaction between low English proficiency and school belonging was marginally statistically significant (p = .064) However, the direction of moderation is opposite of what was hypothesized; instead of school belonging protecting the risk of low English proficiency, it appears that the adverse effect of low English proficiency is actually stronger for students reporting high school belonging (see Figure 1).

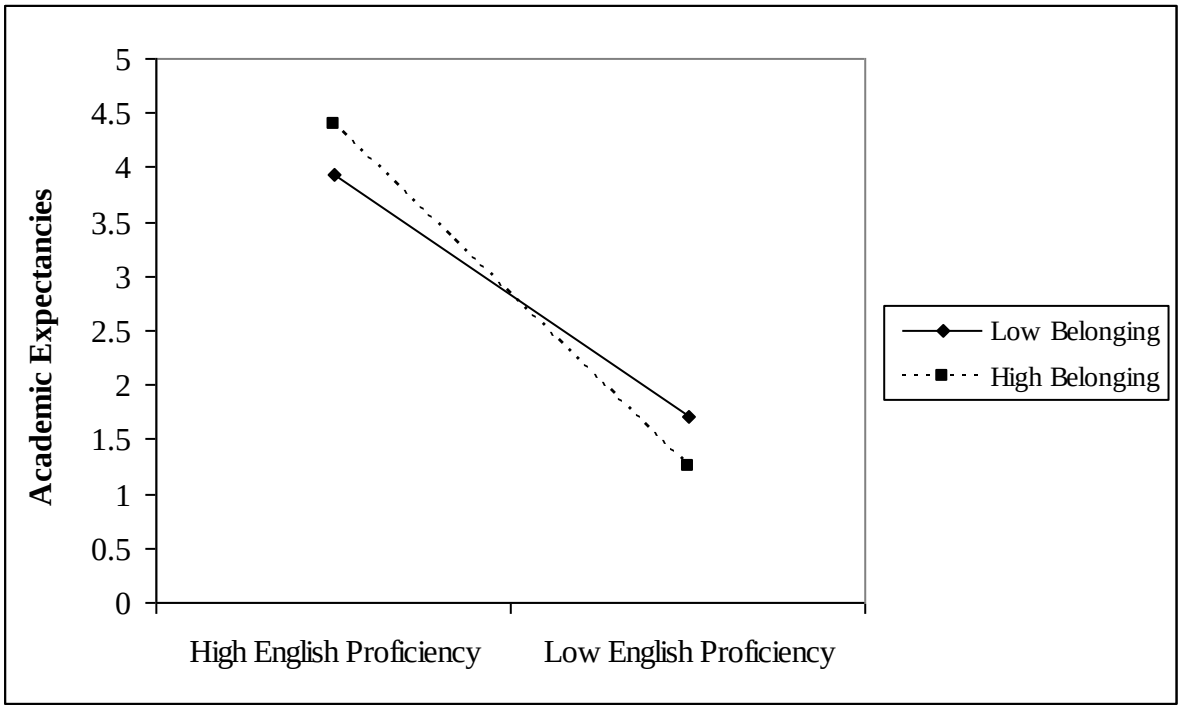

Figure 1. *Graph of Interaction between English Proficiency and School Belonging*

Participants' report of academic expectancies. Points indicate mean expectancies scores across groups of students with high or low school belonging and high or low English proficiency. The interaction is non-significant (p = .064).

Discussion

In correlational analysis, a positive relationship was found between perceived competence and school grades. This finding supports previous research indicating that

competence is positively related to curiosity and a preference for independent mastery (Harter, 1982) and a similar scale is positively related to completing homework and turning in assignments on time (Suarez-Orozco, 2009). There were no other significant relationships between the dependent variables.

Based on consistent findings in the research literature, low English proficiency was expected to have negative relationships with academic performance measures as well as attitudes toward school such as perceived competence and expectancies. School belonging was expected to have the opposing effects, based on findings of positive relationships with performance variables and perceptions. The main purpose of this study was to investigate a possible moderation of the effects of low English proficiency by school belonging. School belonging was expected to weaken the relationships of English proficiency with school-related outcomes.

Low English proficiency did prove to be a risk factor in this study of Korean American adolescents, as it was negatively related to both school grades and academic expectancies and the relationship with perceived scholastic competence was approaching significance. These results support the findings of other studies of immigrant adolescent populations (Bang, Suarez-Orozco, Pakes, & O'Connor, 2009; Ma & Yeh, 2010). Students with low English skills may not be able to comprehend lessons provided at the typical pace, converse with group partners, or communicate through writing as well as their peers. Therefore, they perform at a lower rate and have lower expectations for the future.

School belonging did not conform to current trends in the literature relevant to the education of immigrant students. While belonging was positively related to perceived scholastic competence, it was not predictive of either school grades or academic expectancies. Methodologically, the time of data collection can be a concern. Because the study was conducted

during the summer, it can be expected that most students were not attending school. Students' report of their perceived school social environments may not be as accurate as they would be during the school year, and students may avoid extreme responses in a retrospective report.

The difference in findings may also be due to ethnic differences, as previous research linking belonging to perceived competence and school grades among immigrant students was conducted with Latino students (Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004; Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jiminez, 2008; Stone & Han, 2005). School belonging may not be as salient for students from other backgrounds such as East Asia or Eastern Europe. The combination of Asian values such as conformity to norms, educational responsibilities to family, and emotional self-control (see Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999) may all contribute to students' behavior in the classroom. Students who are influenced by these values may not feel entitled to reciprocal respect from their teachers. Instead, a more submissive orientation to the teacher role may be more readily accepted. Therefore, students may give the same effort regardless of their teacher's reception. Also, one study of school belonging among students in China found somewhat similar results, as belonging was not predictive of students' achievement for younger high school students (Liu & Lu, 2011).

The hypothesis that English proficiency would be moderated by students' school belonging was not supported. In fact, the results for the dependent variable of academic expectancies suggest a quite different finding. The marginally significant interaction between belonging and English proficiency predicting expectancies was in the opposite direction as hypothesized. Instead of school belonging operating as a buffer of the risk of limited English Proficiency, the effect of limited English proficiency on lowered expectancies appeared *stronger* for students reporting more school belonging.

Perhaps a positive social environment is only conducive towards increased expectations for students who are more able to learn and have enriching interactions with their peers and teachers. Students with low English proficiency reporting a positive social environment at school may only be referring to a superficial reception by peers and teachers who appropriately provide non-verbal cues of respect and esteem. While these educators and students may be providing pro-social communication, their respect and esteem cannot boost the students' performance or expectations for success. While many students in Bhattacharya's study (2000) suggested that their teachers were willing to repeat things in simple language for them, this assistance may not provide the same depth of understanding that more English proficient peers gain from the more complex instruction.

It is likely that other factors outside of the realm of this study contribute to Korean American students' confidence, performance, and expectations in a protective manner. Some ethnographical research has provided evidence that elevated peer expectations based on the 'model minority' stereotype may have a significant impact on these immigrant students' outcomes in school. However, this label tends to have a positive effect on some students while adversely affecting others (Lee, 2009).

Outside of the school context, other immigrant-unique dynamics such as acculturation stress may also play a role in the educational process. For example, an indirect protective effect could be provided by adaptive acculturation (low levels of acculturative stress) and its correlation with self-esteem (Park, 2009). Parents and families that place a high value on education, regardless of their own English proficiency level, may also provide protection for students. Such relatives may provide extra social capital by holding their students more

accountable and connecting them to mentors and tutors in the community (see Parcel, Dufur, & Zito, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

Both the size and geographic concentration of the studied sample place limitations on the study. Most of the adolescent participants were recruited from a suburban area known for its concentration and abundance of large ethnic communities. To more accurately represent immigrant youth, families living in more ethnically isolated locations should also be considered. The participants were also relatively high-achieving students, as the distribution of the reported school grades indicates that a majority of the students were probably earning a GPA at or above 3.00. A more diverse group of participants may provide the variance needed for more statistical power. As suggested in its effects on students' report of their school atmosphere, a summertime survey can be expected to provide less accurate data than one collected during the school year.

Despite these limitations, this study provides the first step towards investigating the effects of school belonging among non-Latino immigrant adolescents. The results suggest that although low English proficiency poses a risk for these students, they may have different experiences and needs. Future studies should continue to investigate what these needs may be, and should aim to reach larger and more geographically diverse samples.

Implications and Conclusions

This investigation builds upon prior research (Bhattacharya, 2000; Bang, Suarez-Orozco, Pakes, & O'Connor, 2009; Ma &Yeh, 2010; Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011) to provide more evidence supporting the primacy of English proficiency in the school context for immigrant youth. It also sheds new light on the issue of school belonging for students of Korean, and perhaps other East Asian, backgrounds. When these students are integrated into school

communities, efforts to provide a warm and positive reception may be readily accepted but not necessarily effective in boosting their potential. Only when a degree of English proficiency is obtained can such students gain an advantage from social support. This dynamic adds even more weight to the pressing need for effective English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

While teachers and peers may think their extra efforts to provide support to linguistically disadvantaged students are effective, other types of support may be needed. However, this lack of impact does not imply that teachers' and students' efforts are wasted. There is still overwhelming evidence supporting the protective nature of school belonging, and the students in this investigation may have benefited from positive social atmospheres in areas outside of the realm of study. Past research findings of school belonging connections to decreased risky behavior (Resnick, et al., 1997) and increased attendance and valuing of schoolwork may still generalize to the students studied. Further investigation may clarify if this pattern of protective effects proves to be true for various immigrant populations.

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