Pedagogical Sciences

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CULTIVATING EMOTIONAL LITERACY AND AFFECTIVE COMPETENCE WITHIN BILINGUAL PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXTS

Summary. *This article argues that emotional literacy sits at the intersection of cognitive and affective development in bilingual children, a relationship that has grown harder to ignore as linguistic diversity becomes an everyday classroom reality and frameworks like the Whole Child approach push education toward more holistic goals.*

Neuroscience and cognitive linguistics both point in the same direction: bilingualism does more than expand vocabulary. It engages the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex; the mechanisms children rely on to recognize and regulate what they feel. Building on this, the article draws on emotional granularity and Theory of Mind as analytical tools, and reconsiders the "third space" as a context where hybrid identity can genuinely take root. Empirical data from the USA grounds the argument: where SEL interventions have been sustained, their relationship with the academic performance of bilingual students is statistically significant, with real implications for how inclusive learning environments are built.

The author describes and verifies the efficacy of specific pedagogical modalities ranging from translanguaging pedagogy to body-oriented practices, emphasizing the role of the teacher and familial context in fostering the child`s "emotional immunity". A case study involving 5 states is utilized and contemporary methods for cultivating emotional literacy in bilingual

environments across 12 U.S. cities are examined. The article concludes with the substantiation that an additive approach to bilingualism transforms it from a factor of acculturative stress into a strategic cognitive resource.

Key words: *bilingualism, emotional literacy, socio-affective ontogeny, social and emotional learning (SEL), translanguaging, acculturative stress, neuroplasticity.*

Introduction. Instead of relying on abstract neurobiological models, this article focuses on the practical application of the "Bilingual SEL Development" framework. With more than 22% of U.S. school-age children growing up in multilingual environments, isolated SEL approaches are no longer sufficient [1]. The framework considers bilingualism as a potential cognitive resource when supported by structured emotional and linguistic development [2].

A key issue is emotional acculturation. Children do not only learn labels for emotions in different languages but also internalize distinct patterns of evaluation and response. Under emotional stress, code-switching can increase cognitive load and temporarily weaken regulation [3]. In this context, emotional literacy functions as a stabilizing mechanism. A balanced emotional lexicon in both languages supports adaptation, academic engagement, and social interaction in multicultural settings.

The U.S. context provides a large empirical base. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics show that over 22% of school-age children use a language other than English at home, and around 5 million are classified as English learners. In states such as California and Texas, their share exceeds 20% of public school enrollment [4, 5].

Although SEL programs are widely implemented, their outcomes for bilingual students remain inconsistent. Research indicates a link between emotional development in the native language and academic performance [6]. Students with limited support in emotional competence demonstrate 15–20%

lower levels of socio-affective adaptation. This highlights the need for approaches that coordinate language learning with emotional regulation.

From a neuropsychological perspective, emotional regulation in bilingual children is associated with executive functions, including inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility [7]. Brain systems involved in managing two languages overlap with those responsible for affect regulation [8]. Regular language switching can support these functions, provided that both languages are used intentionally in learning and self-regulation.

Acculturative stress remains a relevant factor, as children navigate between family and societal norms [9]. In this process, bilingualism contributes to the formation of a "third space" – a hybrid identity integrating elements of both cultures [10]. Educational practices that do not account for this dynamic may increase internal tension. Accordingly, emotional literacy can be viewed as part of an environment where linguistic diversity supports intercultural competence rather than complicates it.

Materials and Methods. This study addresses the shift from a narrow academic model toward holistic child development in conditions of increasing linguistic diversity. In the U.S., where over 22% of children grow up in multilingual environments, aligning language and emotional development becomes a key educational task.

Drawing on cognitive linguistics and neuropsychology, the study examines how emotional literacy develops in bilingual children. Code-switching is treated not as a problem to be managed but as a lens onto executive control and emotional regulation. Bilingualism emerges from this analysis as a genuine developmental asset, though one that does not operate independently of teaching – it depends on practices that are consistent and well-structured enough to support it.

The analysis is based on secondary data from U.S. statistical reports and international studies. It combines comparative and neuropsychological

approaches, along with case studies across several states, to assess the role of SEL practices, teacher support, and family involvement.

Research consistently links home language support to stronger socio-affective adaptation, suggesting the benefits run deeper than linguistic competence alone. The relationship is not simple, however. Outcomes vary with the educational setting, the child's stage of language development, age of acquisition, and family background. These variables make broad generalization difficult and interpretation context-dependent.

Author's Original Pedagogical Contribution

The author has developed and implemented an original pedagogical framework titled "Bilingual SEL Development" methodology. Created in 2024 and refined through early 2026, this methodology represents a synthesis of affective neuroscience and translanguaging pedagogy. Unlike standard models, this framework was specifically engineered to facilitate simultaneous linguistic and emotional maturation in bilingual learners.

The novelty of this approach lies in dual-language affective mapping, which treats a child's full linguistic repertoire as a unified system for processing emotions. The methodology has been applied at the Smartik Kids Learning Center with diverse bilingual groups through structured interventions.

While established frameworks such as CASEL and RULER provide a strong basis for emotional learning, they do not fully address the specifics of bilingual cognitive and emotional regulation.

CASEL & RULER: generally, follow a monolingual delivery model that does not account for the cognitive load of code-switching during high affective tension.

Dual language immersion: focuses primarily on academic content and language acquisition, often treating SEL as a secondary, separate component.

In contrast, the "Bilingual SEL Development" framework integrates emotional processing in both languages into everyday instruction. It is designed

with the cognitive features of bilingual learners in mind, so that emotional regulation develops alongside academic learning rather than separately.

The methodology`s efficacy is verified through its application at Smartik LLC, where it currently serves 55 students (40 in group settings and 15 through individual instruction). The program operates on a rigorous 6-day-per-week schedule, providing consistent longitudinal exposure to bilingual SEL strategies.

Children who participated in this program became noticeably better at naming and making sense of their own emotions, and reported feeling less anxious when working in their second language. Their teachers observed something equally telling: students began expressing themselves with greater confidence, connected more readily with peers, and showed a renewed investment in their own learning.

1. **Emotional literacy as a foundational pillar of holistic child development.** Today, paradigms regarding the harmonious development of the child have shifted significantly. While previously the primary focus was on academic knowledge, development is now viewed holistically and emotional literacy is becoming one of the central factors [17]. Unlike the broader concept of emotional intelligence, emotional literacy in a scientific vector is considered an applied cognitive technology – that is, the ability to identify and interpret affective states, as well as strategically use them to facilitate intellectual activity and social navigation. This construct serves as a link between the biological maturation of the nervous system and sociocultural inculturation, providing synergy between prefrontal control and limbic reactions. In the context of the modern educational environment oriented toward the "Whole child" doctrine, emotional literacy is positioned as a necessary prerequisite for the realization of cognitive potential, without which academic achievements lose their systemic stability (see: Figure 1).

Fig. 1. "Whole child" model and place of emotional literacy

From the perspective of neurobiology, emotional literacy is a leading predictor of neuroplasticity during sensitive periods of development [18]. The process of transforming affect into a symbol – that is, the process of verbalizing a feeling induces specific neural activation: a reduction in amygdala hyperactivity with a simultaneous strengthening of connections to the prefrontal cortex. This decoupling of the immediate emotional reaction from the subsequent action underlies the development of executive functions, such as inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. The psychological aspect of this process is closely linked to the concept of emotional granularity. The more accurately a child can differentiate nuances of their states, the higher their capacity for self-regulation and psychological resilience (see: Figure 2) [19]. In this sense, pedagogy views emotional literacy as a fundamental tool for protecting the psyche from degradation caused by chronic stress or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) [20].

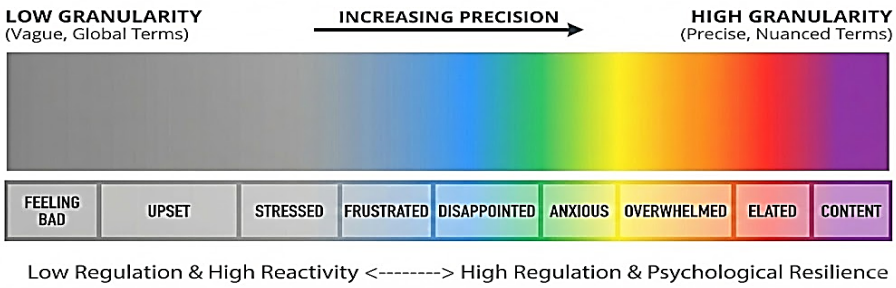


Fig. 2. Spectrum of emotional granularity

In the U.S., emotional literacy is not a standalone subject. It lives inside SEL programs and everyday classroom practice, and frameworks like CASEL have been making the case for years that these skills belong to academic life, not alongside it. In diverse classrooms the connection is visible: how students manage conflict and read each other shapes how they learn. Early SEL support, research suggests, correlates with better academic outcomes and fewer behavioral difficulties.

The fact that emotional skills now appear in the UNESCO and OECD "Future of Education and Skills 2030" agenda says something about how the conversation has shifted. Digital competencies no longer dominate the frame. What increasingly matters is how students handle pressure, navigate difference, and recover when things go wrong. Children who develop these capacities early tend to respond rather than react, and that distinction follows them well beyond the classroom.

These capacities do not arrive fully formed. They develop through guided practice, gradually becoming less something taught and more something inhabited –part of how a student reads a situation, repairs a misunderstanding, or holds steady when things get complicate.

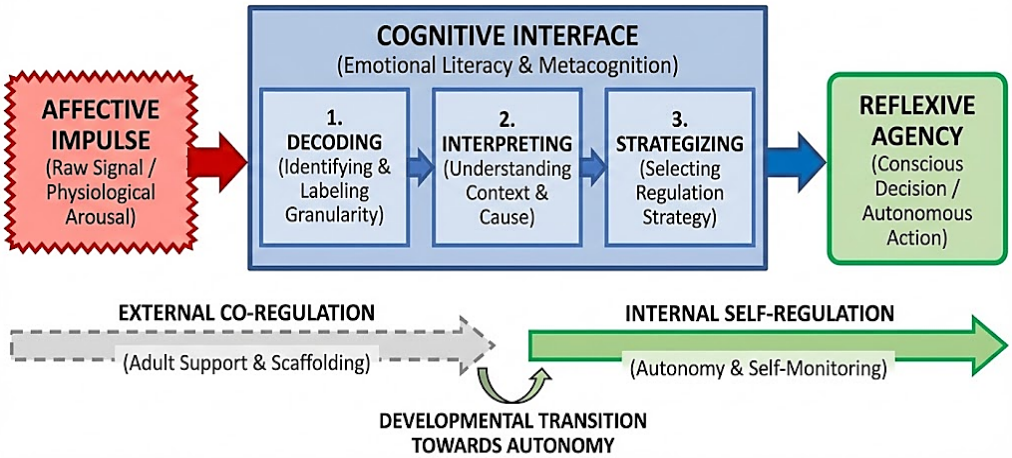


Fig. 3. Cognitive interface: from impulse to subjectivity

2. **The impact of a bilingual milieu on socio-affective ontogeny in children + 5 case studies.** The impact of a bilingual environment on socio-affective development is complex and involves continuous interaction between language and emotion. Unlike monolingual peers, bilingual children constantly move between different languages and cultural frames, which affects how they interpret and manage emotions [24]. This ongoing switching is linked to greater neural flexibility. It engages prefrontal systems involved in both cognitive control and emotion regulation, which helps children respond to stress and social situations with more flexibility.

From a psychological perspective, bilingual development is also linked to earlier formation of "theory of mind." Children become more aware that others may think, feel, and communicate differently, which strengthens perspective-taking and social understanding [25]. Regular code-switching reinforces this skill and contributes to higher levels of empathy.

Access to two languages also supports emotional development. A wider emotional vocabulary makes it easier to distinguish between similar feelings, which improves self-reflection and regulation. Rather than creating confusion, language diversity can deepen emotional awareness.

In U.S. education, this is often framed through the idea of a "third space," where children bring together elements of both cultures into a more stable sense of self [26]. This process needs guidance, especially when there is tension between home and school norms. Studies show that when both languages are integrated into the child's self-concept, outcomes tend to be stronger in both well-being and academic performance.

The following cases illustrate how bilingual environments across different U.S. contexts support the development of emotional competence.

Case №1: California (Spanish-English bilingualism) – leadership through translanguaging. 9 years old Sofia, enrolled in a dual-immersion program, demonstrated exceptional mediation skills in a school conflict situation. Through

the practice of translanguaging – the free use of resources from both languages to express meanings, she was able to verbalize the positions of parties belonging to different ethnic groups and serve as an emotional bridge. Her success is attributed to a developed capacity for decentration. Sofia used Spanish to establish a trusting affective contact and English to structure logical arguments, which allowed for the resolution of the conflict at the level of core values rather than merely formal rules.

Case №2: New York (Mandarin-English bilingualism) – cognitive flexibility and stress regulation. 11 years old Ethan, growing up in the highly competitive academic environment of New York, showed outstanding results in emotional self-regulation while preparing for standardized tests. His educators noted that Ethan uses internal code-switching as a metacognitive tool. When anxiety in English became overwhelming, he found himself shifting inwardly to Mandarin and with that shift came distance, and a different way of seeing the situation. It is a small moment, but it points to something larger: that a second language can function as a kind of psychological buffer, offering the mind an alternate route when one path becomes too charged.

Case 3: Illinois (Arabic–English bilingualism) – language, metaphor, and social perception.

Layla, ten years old, split her week between a Chicago public school and an Arabic weekend program. Arabic, rich in emotional metaphor, seemed to sharpen something in her – an attunement to tone, gesture, the unspoken. Teachers and classmates noticed it: she could sense when someone was pulling away, and knew how to respond. Her case, while individual, points to something worth taking seriously: that living between languages may quietly train children to read the social world with greater precision.

Case 4: Massachusetts (Portuguese–English bilingualism) – executive control and behavior in social situations.

Lucas's bilingual skills showed up in places no test was designed to capture. In social situations – facing peer pressure, or a provocation he could easily have escalated – he tended to pause, recalibrate, and choose the quieter response. It was a pattern, not an accident.

Whether this reflects something about managing two languages or something particular to Lucas is difficult to say with certainty. But in his case, bilingual experience seemed to accompany a kind of deliberateness: steadier emotions, and a genuine ability to step back from situations that pulled at him.

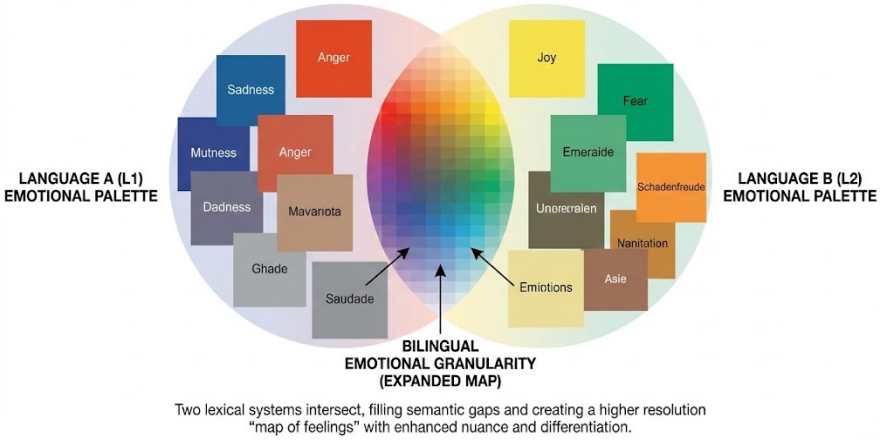


Fig. 4. Mechanism of linguistic relativity in emotions

3. **Core constituents and psychological constructs of pediatric emotional literacy.** Emotional literacy in children is a multi-level system with several interacting components. These components help explain how children move from automatic emotional reactions to more controlled responses. The central link of this system is affective labeling the ability to transform vague physiological arousal into a specific linguistic category. This process is not a mere nomination. It represents a massive cognitive representation in which the verbal symbol becomes a tool for mastering emotion. The higher the level of the child`s emotional granularity - that is, the ability to differentiate nuances of states (for example, distinguishing disappointment from anger or anxiety from excitement) - the more effectively the self-regulation system functions, preventing the

development of affective flooding (see: Figure 5. Multi-level pyramid of structures) [27].

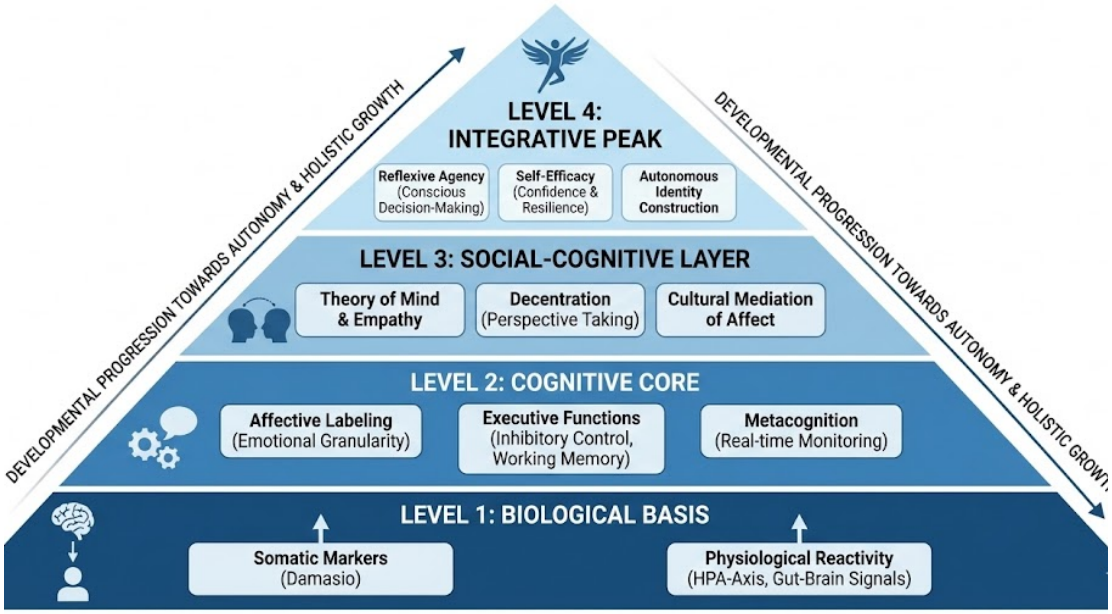


Fig. 5. Multi-level pyramid of structures

Inhibitory control and executive functioning allow children to pause before reacting - and in bilingual children, the daily work of managing two languages appears to strengthen exactly these capacities, making emotional responses more stable over time.

Emotional literacy is not only about managing oneself. As children develop empathy and theory of mind, they begin to grasp that others experience the world differently, and that recognition tends to make cooperation less effortful and conflict less reflexive. Growing awareness of internal states gradually replaces impulsive behavior with responses shaped by emerging social understanding.

Bilingual experience adds something specific here. Children who move between languages learn early that emotions are not expressed the same way in every context. That sensitivity tends to make their responses more flexible, and more attuned to the situation in front of them.

Together, these components form a coherent system that supports the child's integration into academic and social contexts and links emotional experience with cognitive and personal development [28].

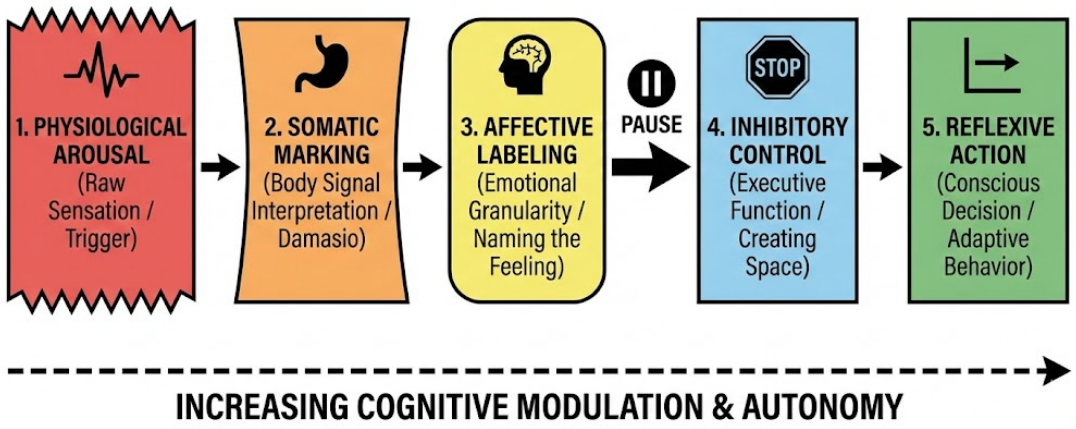
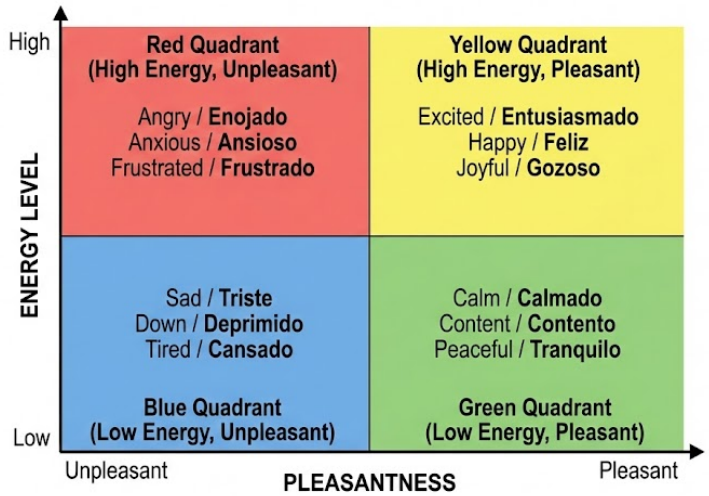


Fig. 6. Flow diagram "From impulse to conscious action"

Based on the neuropsychology of Antonio Damasio, an important construct of emotional literacy is the system of somatic markers – a mechanism through which the body's physiological reactions to emotional stimuli are integrated into the decision-making process [29]. In pediatric practice, this component manifests as the child's ability to read their own body's signals (increased heart rate as a precursor to anxiety) before they reach the level of conscious awareness. The development of this integrative link between body and cognition allows the child to use emotions as intuitive navigators, which is critically important under the conditions of high informational load and cognitive dissonance characteristic of bilingual education. An additional psychological construct is emotional self-efficacy – the child's internal conviction in their ability to successfully manage affective states and overcome emotional challenges. This construct is a powerful predictor of motivation and psychological resilience. A child with high self-efficacy perceives complex emotional situations not as a threat, but as a task requiring a solution. In U.S. educational contexts, this connects to the growth mindset framework in a practical way. When bilingual children come to see emotional literacy as something developed through experience rather than a fixed

trait, they tend to engage with new linguistic and social environments more actively. The risk of learned helplessness, research suggests, is lower when that belief is in place.

4. **Pedagogical modalities for cultivating emotional literacy within dual-language instructional frameworks.** In dual-language settings, emotional literacy tends to grow not from instruction alone, but from experience – moments where language and feeling meet in real time. In U.S. classrooms, this often takes shape through scaffolding designed with social-emotional learning in mind: temporary support that allows children to express what they feel in a second language without abandoning the emotional vocabulary they already carry in their first. In San Diego schools, California, the bilingual mood meter technique is actively employed, where visual stimuli and lexical units from both languages are integrated into a single coordinate system (see: Figure 7. Bilingual RULER). This enables students to translate emotion labels and compare their cultural and contextual nuances, ensuring a seamless transition between the affective codes of two cultures.



Visual tool for mapping emotional states across English and Spanish lexical systems, facilitating cultural conceptualization.

Fig. 7. Bilingual RULER

Naturally, translanguaging pedagogy, which views the child`s linguistic repertoire as a unified cognitive resource, serves as a paramount modality within

bilingual instruction [30]. In New York school districts, characterized by extreme linguistic diversification, this methodology is utilized to facilitate emotional self-expression. Educators are encouraged to promote the use of the heritage language to describe primary affective reactions, followed by the collaborative construction of meaning in English. Drawing on their full linguistic repertoire rather than being confined to one language lowers both emotional barriers and cognitive load. Evidence from New York schools suggests that translanguaging practices are associated with reduced anxiety and a greater willingness to engage in the kinds of conversations that actually require something of students.

Culturally responsive SEL builds on this by taking into account how emotions are expressed in different cultures. In Austin, Texas, schools integrate family narratives and folklore into the curriculum. Through these activities, students discuss emotional situations from multiple perspectives, which supports empathy and is associated with stronger prosocial behavior and social integration.

Boston programs have found a practical entry point in digital storytelling. Children produce short audio or video projects in both languages, drawing on their own experiences. The format is deceptively simple: it asks children to think and feel at once, and that combination, sustained over time, seems to strengthen the link between emotional awareness and more complex thinking.

One of the most scientifically substantiated modalities, developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and widely applied in Connecticut and New York schools, is the RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating) approach [31]. The uniqueness of this method in a bilingual context lies in the use of emotional literacy anchors, such as the mood meter and meta-moment, which have now been fully adapted into Spanish, Mandarin and other languages. In Westport schools (Connecticut), the implementation of bilingual feeling charters allowed students to collectively discuss how they wish to feel in the classroom, utilizing the conceptual apparatus of both languages. This approach broadens children's emotional vocabulary

while acknowledging culturally specific ways of expression, turning ideas about self-regulation into usable language tools.

In some districts – Arlington, Texas among them – music has found its way into bilingual instruction for a simple reason: it gives children a way to express what words, especially in a new language, cannot yet reach. Teachers introduce emotional themes through songs in the home language first, then gradually shift toward English, letting meaning and language arrive together rather than one at a time.

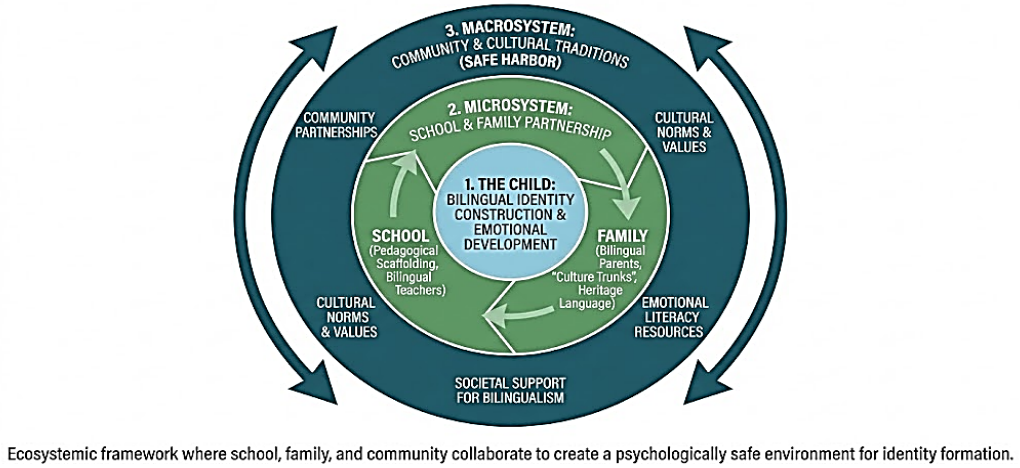
Program data suggest that this type of multisensory learning supports faster processing and helps reduce emotional withdrawal that can appear during periods of adjustment.

Urban schools in Philadelphia and Chicago have been quietly expanding their SEL practice to include the body. Simple mindfulness exercises – breathing techniques, basic yoga – are woven into bilingual instruction, helping children build a bridge between physical sensation and emotional language. For students from migrant backgrounds in particular, the presence of the home language seems to lower the threshold for participation, creating enough safety to engage.

Chicago observations point to something interesting: as children become more attuned to their own bodily signals, they seem to develop a sharper eye for similar cues in others – at times across language barriers entirely.

In Washington State, several Seattle districts have taken a different angle, turning to families as the starting point rather than an afterthought. Parents bring in stories, objects, small rituals – things that carry the emotional texture of life at home. In doing so, they help children move between two worlds without having to leave either one behind. The sense of belonging that follows feels less like a side effect and more like the whole point.

Schools that use this approach report higher participation and stronger interest in learning among bilingual students.



Ecosystemic framework where school, family, and community collaborate to create a psychologically safe environment for identity formation.

Fig. 8. Safe harbor

5. **The efficacy of curricular interventions in enhancing emotional competence among bilingual cohorts.** Systemic interventions in bilingual education consolidate separate pedagogical practices into a unified developmental framework. Their effectiveness is reflected not only in language outcomes, but in changes in socio-affective functioning [32].

The most effective U.S. models do not treat emotional development as a separate strand. It is built into language and subject learning from the start. Where the home language is genuinely supported, rather than permitted as a concession, children tend to regulate themselves more steadily and maintain a clearer sense of who they are. In contexts where identity fragmentation is a genuine risk, that stability matters more than it might initially appear.

Longitudinal data from bilingual states suggest that emotional regulation does not stay neatly inside SEL lessons. It shows up in academic performance across subjects and quietly erodes the anxiety that tends to follow second-language learners. Bilingual reflection and metacognitive tasks appear to be part of what makes this possible, keeping emotional awareness and language use connected rather than separate.

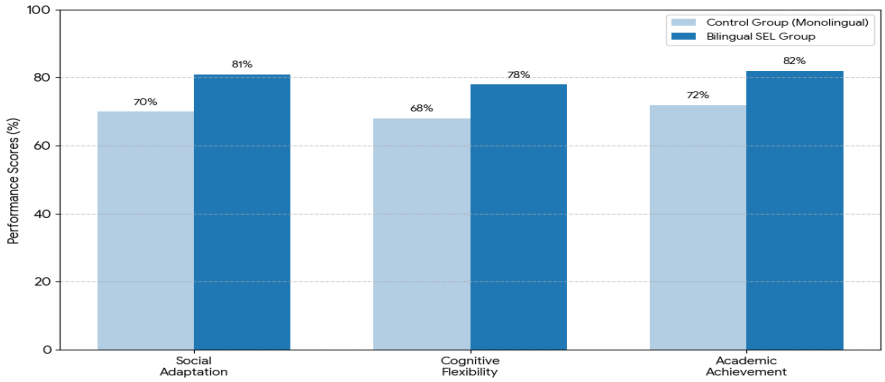


Fig. 9. SEL intervention vs control groups

The effectiveness of modern programs largely depends on an additive approach, where bilingualism is treated as a resource rather than a deficit. In this model, emotional competence develops alongside the ability to operate across different cultural and emotional contexts. When such approaches are implemented at the district level, they provide continuity in emotional development from early grades to graduation, which supports stable self-esteem in bilingual students [33].

Outcomes depend a lot on the teacher. Programs tend to work better when educators are able to build trust and handle emotional situations in class. In some states, including Massachusetts, teacher training covers mindfulness and working in culturally mixed groups. Without this, even strong programs often turn into routine tasks with limited effect.

Results tend to be stronger when learning reaches beyond the classroom. Programs like Head Start bring bilingual parents into the process so that what children practice at school continues at home – and when the home language is genuinely part of that exchange, students arrive more engaged and more secure. School and family stop feeling like separate systems.

Some districts have started tracking shifts in the socio-emotional climate over time – a practice that proves its worth especially during intensive second-language learning, when emotional control can quietly erode before anyone names it as a problem.

The programs with the most durable results share a common instinct: they return rather than move on, revisiting core ideas at greater depth as students grow. That patience creates the conditions for bilingual identity to develop on its own terms, and for students to move between social worlds without feeling they have to choose one.

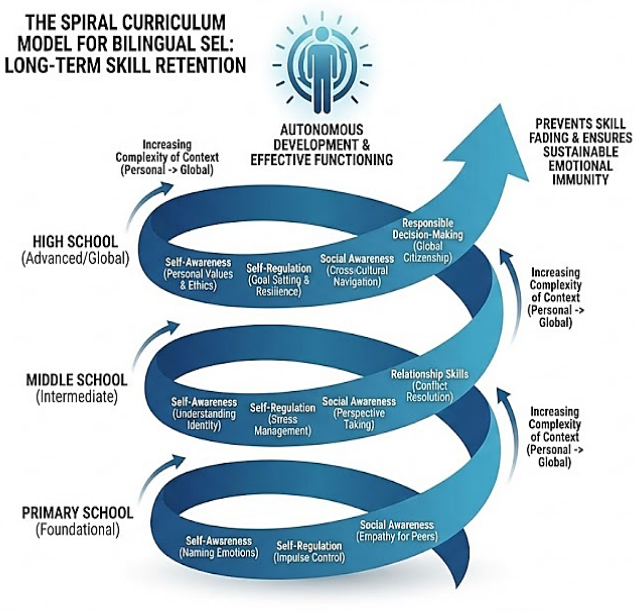


Fig. 10. Spiral structure

Conclusions. The results point to a clear link between emotional literacy and how bilingual children cope with stress and learning demands. Regular switching between languages seems to train the same control processes used in managing emotions. With the right support, this carries over into better self-regulation. In this sense, bilingualism works less as a risk factor and more as an added resource for understanding emotions and social situations.

When home and school pull in the same direction, children settle in more easily. Acknowledging both cultural contexts shifts the teacher's role in practice, from instructor to guide, and regular use of both languages builds a confidence that eventually carries beyond the classroom.

This only works if it is sustained. Revisiting core ideas over time, with increasing depth, is what gives self-regulation and identity room to develop rather than stall.

The consequences are concrete. Without this alignment, students fall behind academically and tend to feel socially isolated. Where it holds, the picture changes: integration comes more naturally, progress is steadier, and the gains tend to stick.

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