



## Teacher-child racial/ethnic match within pre-kindergarten classrooms and children's early school adjustment



Jason T. Downer\*, Priscilla Goble, Sonya S. Myers, Robert C. Pianta

Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, University of Virginia, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Using a large, longitudinal data set that represents 701 state-funded pre-k classrooms and over 2,900 children enrolled in 11 states, the current study examined two hypotheses: (1) children would be perceived to be better adjusted at the beginning of pre-k when rated by a same-race teacher than by a different-race teacher, and (2) children would demonstrate greater gains during the pre-k year when in the classroom of a same-race teacher. Children rarely experienced a teacher with a different race/ethnicity from themselves, except in the case of African American or Latino children attending Caucasian teachers' classrooms. When examining the school readiness outcomes of African American or Latino children matched or mismatched racially/ethnically with their teacher, racial/ethnic match demonstrated significant associations with the direct assessment of academic skills for Latino children only. However, teachers' initial perceptions of children and teacher reported social and academic gains were significantly associated with racial/ethnic match for African American children.

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### 1. Introduction

The racial/ethnic achievement gap, evident as early as kindergarten (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011), continues to represent one of the most persistent challenges for the American educational system (Berends & Penaloza, 2008; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). Largely but not entirely conflated with socioeconomic status or poverty, this gap has on occasion been attributed in part to a potential cultural mismatch between the home and school environments for children of color (Rogoff, 2003; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). More specifically, in early childhood education (ECE) settings, the prevalence of young children from racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds that are not Caucasian or middle-class often exceeds 75% of a classroom or program enrollment. Although it has been argued that one source of the achievement gap, or the educational system's impotency to close it, is a potential misalignment of belief systems and socialization practices between educators and the family backgrounds of young children of color (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), empirical evidence for this argument, particularly from large pre-k samples,

is lacking (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Howes & Shivers, 2006). Given the considerable efforts to close achievement gaps for young students, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in early education, concerns that programs for young children are not adequately addressing educational needs of racially or ethnically diverse students, and indications of overrepresentation of these students in groups designated as somehow failing, the present study examines one factor that has been identified as a possible contributor to students' adjustment and success – racial or ethnic match with their teacher (Bates & Glick, 2013; Benner & Yan, 2014; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Howes et al., 2011; Jennings & DiPrete, 2010; McGrady, & Reynolds, 2013).

Using a large, longitudinal data set that represents 701 state-funded pre-k classrooms from 11 states in the early 2000's, the current study examines racial/ethnic match between teachers and young children in pre-k programs in relation to teachers' perceptions of child adjustment and directly-assessed school readiness outcomes in a series of stages. We first describe the extent to which African American and Latino pre-k children share race/ethnicity with their classroom teachers, computing rates of ethnic match for this large sample of preschoolers. In the current study, Caucasian is used to describe non-Hispanic White children and teachers, African American is used to describe non-Hispanic Black children and teachers, and Latino is used to describe Hispanic children and teachers of any race. The data used in the current study are now nearly 15 years old. In the past 15 years there is ample evidence that the

\* Corresponding author at: PO Box 800784, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0784, United States.

E-mail address: [jdowner@virginia.edu](mailto:jdowner@virginia.edu) (J.T. Downer).

rates of Latino and African American children served in pre-k programs have in fact risen (Bates & Glick, 2013), while the workforce remains largely White (National Research Council, 2012). Thus, the extent to which African American and Latino pre-k children share race/ethnicity with their classroom teachers may in fact be conservative estimates of the level of mismatch in the pre-k sector today.

Next, we conduct a series of analyses that focus on *two groups of children of color*, African American and Latino (separately for English proficient and non-English proficient). Within each of those groups, we contrast outcomes for children taught by same-race/ethnicity teachers with those taught by teachers of different (Caucasian) backgrounds, after controlling for the children's socioeconomic status. In this framework of within-ethnic group contrasts, we examine two potential explanations for the achievement gap: (1) an African American or Latino child will be perceived to be better adjusted (have more social skills, greater language/literacy skills, and fewer problem behaviors) at the beginning of pre-k when rated by a same-race teacher than by a different-race teacher, and, (2) an African American or Latino child will demonstrate more gains in social, language, literacy, and math skills during the pre-k year when in the classroom of a same-race teacher rather than a different-race teacher. Finally, we consider children's gender and poverty status, two factors consistently linked with teacher perceptions and academic and social adjustment (e.g., Graves, Blake, & Kim, 2012; Rothstein, 2008), as moderators of the relations between racial/ethnic match, teacher perceptions, and child gains.

The two questions posed above, as targets for analysis, pertain to two themes that have surfaced in discussions of educational program effects for diverse groups of children: the extent to which teachers may not accurately interpret the social behavior of ethnically mismatched children (which we examine with analyses of teacher perceptions in the fall of the school year) and the possibility that the ethnic match between teachers and children enables a more effective learning environment in the classroom that translates into better-developed skills for children in a match. Empirical results pertaining to these questions, from a large sample of young children and their teachers, have implications for the design and implementation of effective early education programs for diverse groups of children.

### 1.1. Why is the ethnicity of pre-k teachers and children important?

The growth of racial/ethnic minorities as the majority population is occurring rapidly in the U.S.; in 2011 the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the country had reached a historic tipping point with Latino, Asian, and mixed-race births constituting a majority of births (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The proportion of children who are Caucasian, non-Hispanic is projected to fall steadily in the future, dropping below 50% by 2019 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). The corresponding rise of the new American majority does not reflect the emergence of a single numerically dominant group, but instead a mosaic of diverse racial/ethnic groups from around the world (see Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008, for details). In 2012, 24% of all U.S. children were Hispanic, 14% were African American, non-Hispanic, 5% were Asian, non-Hispanic, and 5% were of other non-White and non-Hispanic races (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). By 2050, the projections indicate that among all U.S. children, the proportions will be 36% Hispanic, 36% White, non-Hispanic, and 28% African American, Asian, and Native American, and Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. And, the number of immigrant families in the U.S. has grown over the years. As of 2010, one in every four children in the U.S. had at least one foreign-born parent (Grieco et al., 2012). A parallel and related demographic trend is

the rise in linguistic diversity. Among the foreign-born population from Latin America, families primarily reported speaking Spanish at home. In fact, English was only reported as the primary language spoken at home for a small percentage of families from South America (15%), Central America (7%), and Mexico (3%; Grieco et al., 2012).

Demographic trends toward greater racial/ethnic and linguistic diversity are especially noteworthy due to their consistent link with family income. Thus, income becomes a key factor when considering the impact of ethnicity and race on school readiness. In particular, young racial/ethnic minority children are two to four times more likely than Caucasians to be officially poor. Hernandez et al. (2008) presented poverty rate estimates that were adjusted for inflation and actual cost of living, which tends to increase estimates of poverty considerably. For example, the readjusted rate suggests that about 31% of young U.S.-born Caucasian children are impoverished, whereas the rates for most U.S.-born racial/ethnic minority groups and high poverty immigrant groups are in the range of 48%–82% (see Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). And, the majority of language minority children in the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten (ECLS-K) were in the two lowest quintiles for household SES (52%); 80% of the Spanish speakers who were judged to be the least fluent in English were in the lowest two SES quintiles (Espinosa, Laffey, & Whittaker, 2006).

Overlaid on this monumental shift in the ethnic and economic makeup of young children and their families is the relatively static and skewed ethnic make-up of the early education workforce. Information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that the early childhood education teacher workforce is composed of a substantial majority of Caucasian females (75–80%; National Research Council, 2012), though the proportion is somewhat lower in Head Start programs (45% Caucasian, 99% female; Hulseley et al., 2011). A recent report by The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and The National Research Council (NRC) also highlights that the early education workforce is stratified by position along these dimensions of race/ethnicity and language, with lead teachers and directors more likely to be monolingual English speakers and Caucasian (IOM & NRC, 2015). Within most early education programs, many if not most African American and Latino children are taught by Caucasian teachers and it is these very children, often poor, who enter kindergarten behind their same-aged peers (Jacobson Chernoff, Flanagan, McPhee, & Park, 2007; Johnson et al., 2003). The extent of this race/ethnic mismatch in preschool, particularly for poor children being served by publicly-funded programs, is considerable and has been suggested as a possible explanation for achievement and developmental gaps reported (Downey & Pribesh, 2004).

The present study was designed to make a modest contribution to understanding the extent of ethnic mismatch in publicly funded early education and its association with children's learning. More specifically, we examine two facets of this issue, whether mismatch is associated with (a) teacher perceptions of children's adjustment, under the hypothesis that teachers' views of children's behavior can be informed by ethnicity, and (b) children's learning gains in pre-k, under the assumption that children may learn more in an ethnically synchronous relationship with their teacher.

### 1.2. Teacher-child ethnic similarity and teachers' reports of child adjustment and skills

There is some evidence that teacher-child racial-ethnic match is linked to teachers' differential perceptions of the social and academic behaviors of children in their classrooms. Almost thirty years ago, Alexander, Entwisle and Thompson (1987) posited that teachers from backgrounds that differ from those of their students are more likely to place amplified importance on "misleading

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