



# Preschool to kindergarten transition patterns for African American boys



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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on the transition patterns of African American boys from preschool to kindergarten using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) dataset. Analyses were conducted to examine whether socioeconomic status, parenting (i.e., emotional support, intrusiveness), and attendance in a center-based program predicted likelihood of being in a particular transition pattern. Four patterns emerged from the data: (1) Increasing Academically, (2) Early Achiever: Declining Academically & Socially, (3) Low Achiever: Declining Academically, and (4) Consistent Early Achiever. There was heterogeneity in the school transition patterns of African American boys, with many showing stability from preschool to kindergarten. Family income and parenting practices and interactions were associated with an increased probability of being in the group that showed a significant increase in academics, suggesting the importance of parents' provision of enriching opportunities and experiences for African American boys as they transition from preschool to kindergarten.

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## 1. Introduction

The transition to kindergarten can be challenging for many children due to new academic and behavioral expectations, novel social interactions, and physiological changes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Research suggests heterogeneity in children's transitions to kindergarten with many children displaying different growth patterns and fluctuations in academic and social functioning before, during and after the transition to kindergarten (Alexander, Entwisle, Blyth, & McAdoo, 1988; Konold & Pianta, 2005). Such heterogeneity may also be expected for African American boys when examining multiple dimensions of development, namely academic and social skills. However, minimal research exists on the varying patterns of African American boys' school transitions. Such research is particularly important for understanding the trajectories of African American boys whose transition may be even more arduous than other groups of children, given the additional sociocultural challenges that some face when teachers view their behaviors negatively and assume that they are deficient cognitively (Davis, 2003; Davis, Kilburn, & Schultz, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Sbarra & Pianta, 2001; Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil, & Warheit, 1995). Thus, the

current study seeks to address this gap by examining the nature of transitions from preschool to kindergarten for African American boys.

The current study uses a person-centered approach to determine the patterns of academic achievement and social behavior during African American boys' preschool–kindergarten transition. This approach is an alternative to a variable-centered approach which focuses on generalized associations between variables across a sample. Early childhood research on the developmental competencies of ethnic minority children has become overwhelmingly variable-centered, neglecting to fully leverage the value of person-centered analyses, which can illustrate how different child attributes co-vary with one another at the level of the individual (Marsh, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Morin, 2009), revealing nuances and profiles in how a child develops. As the basis for the person-centered approach, the current study examines patterns of boys' academic and social competence over the course of the transition to kindergarten. Academic and social competence are both relevant to children's successful academic matriculation (Duncan et al., 2007) and taken together, they present a more holistic, complex, integrated picture of a child's development than examining either one in isolation (Daily, Burkhauser, & Halle, 2010). In addition to examining patterns of boys' transitions, the current study examines several factors associated with these transitions, including family and child characteristics and parenting practices.

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### 1.1. Theoretical background

The integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children (García Coll et al., 1996) provides a framework for considering heterogeneity in the kindergarten transition patterns of African American boys. This model underscores how African American boys may be impacted by the opportunities and expectations they experience due to their race, gender, and socio-economic status. García Coll et al. (1996) emphasize the interplay between several inter- and intrapersonal characteristics for understanding variability in the development of ethnic minority youth. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the specific interactions between social position (e.g., ethnicity, social class), social environments (e.g., schools and out-of-home care), and family processes and characteristics (e.g., parenting), and their relation to patterns of academic and social competence for preschool African American boys transitioning into kindergarten. The integrative model posits family processes may serve as protective mechanisms for children. For African American boys transitioning into kindergarten, family processes (i.e., sensitive parent–child interactions) may buffer the negative effects of low teacher expectations (Garibaldi, 1992; Graham & Robinson, 2004; Pigott & Cowen, 2000) or the general challenges associated with the transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Similarly, social position, such as SES, can serve as protective factors during school transition by providing boys with enriching resources and opportunities that prepare them for formal schooling.

### 1.2. African American Boys' kindergarten transition patterns

There is a plethora of research that emphasizes the shortcomings of African American boys, resulting in a dearth of literature that focuses on these boys' strengths. Nevertheless, there is evidence that many African American boys transition into kindergarten prepared to learn and excel (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). For instance, over 50% of African American preschool-age boys were proficient at number and shape recognition (Aud et al., 2010). African American children in the early years, including boys, produce narratives of higher quality and have greater narrative comprehension compared to White children (Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012). A recent report from the National Center for Children in Poverty showed that once socioeconomic status was controlled, African American boys had better reading and math outcomes in preschool and kindergarten compared to White boys (Aratani, Wight, & Cooper, 2011).

While research confirms the existence of heterogeneity in African American boys' learning, it does not provide clarity about changes in boys' skills across school transitions. A few studies have examined transition patterns (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Konold & Pianta, 2005), though not specifically for African American boys. Konold and Pianta (2005) examined patterns of children's school transition (11% of the sample was African American) based on their pre-kindergarten skills and found that the profiles of children's cognitive ability and behavior problems predicted academic skills in first grade. Thus, while the literature suggests heterogeneity in school transition patterns among predominantly White samples of children, no studies have specifically focused on African American boys academic and social changes as they transition from preschool to kindergarten.

The focus on boys' academic and social competence is warranted given evidence showing that these early skills predict positive transitions and later school outcomes. Early competence in the area of expressive language as well as reading and math has been associated with positive school transitions and later school performance (Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Tabors, Roach, & Snow, 2001; Zohar & Dori, 2003). That

is, the ability to communicate prepares children to be able to convey their thoughts and emotions. Early reading skills support children's acquisition of new knowledge in all academic areas, while early math skills promote higher-order and critical thinking (e.g., synthesizing and analyzing). Similarly early social competence, such as the ability to follow instruction, behave appropriately, communicate, and interact with peers and adults, has been associated with adaptive school transitions and is often viewed by kindergarten teachers as critical to children's adjustment and learning (Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989; Ladd & Price, 1987; Taylor, 1991).

### 1.3. Predictors of transition patterns for African American boys

There are a number of important factors to consider for African American boys as they transition from preschool to kindergarten including family background, parent–child relationship, and early educational experiences. African American boys are more likely to live in and experience more challenging environments than their peers (Davis, 2003). National data shows that during the first five years of life African American boys were more likely to experience poverty, reside in one-parent households, have mothers with less than a high school education, have more mothers exhibiting depressive symptomatology, and were less likely to be read to daily when compared to White boys (Aratani et al., 2011; Najarian, Snow, Lennon, & Kinsey, 2010). In spite of the obstacles they face, numerous African-American boys excel academically and are socially competent (Noguera, 2003).

García Coll et al. (1996) note that children's environments and family processes play key roles in minority children's development. Therefore, it is expected that the most proximal settings (e.g., home, preschool) will directly impact young African American boys' learning and behavior and subsequently, how they transition into school. Thus, family and preschool environments are likely to promote or inhibit an adaptive transition into school. In this study, we focus on socioeconomic status, home literacy practices, parent–child interactions, and attendance in center-based care to predict African American boys' preschool to kindergarten transition patterns.

Family socioeconomic status (SES) has been linked to children's adjustment to formal schooling (Conger et al., 1992; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2007; McLoyd, 1998; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Ruby, & Johnson, 1990). Specifically, research has indicated that high-SES families have greater resources to provide access to materials and experiences that prepare children to meet the academic and social expectations of schools.

The proximal processes of parenting, which includes sensitive parent–child interactions and cognitively stimulating opportunities, have been linked to African American children's school readiness and optimal school transition (Iruka, Burchinal, & Cai, 2010; Reynolds, Weissberg, & Kaspro, 1992). Researchers found the more sensitive mothers were with their children, the less anxious or inhibited children were during the transition to kindergarten (Early et al., 2002). Parents and caregivers who are authoritative and emotionally available and supportive are likely to provide environments for children that engage them in contingent verbal and nonverbal exchanges and higher-order thinking, as well as encourage appropriate behaviors. As the behavioral and academic expectations for children increase in kindergarten, these parenting practices prepare children to deal with "formalized instruction" and the demands of formal schooling (Gullo & Burton, 1993; Reynolds et al., 1992; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

In addition to family resources and parenting practices, attendance in preschool center-based environments is also thought to be associated with children's school transition by preparing them for the structure, processes, expectations, and interactions (i.e.,

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