

Investigating the Academic and Social Experiences of

Black Male Collegians Formerly in Foster Care

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational backgrounds and experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care. Interviews were conducted with 11 Black male foster care alumni who were current students or recent graduates of degree-granting postsecondary institutions. During this qualitative study, Black male collegians formerly in foster care (BMFCCs) were interviewed via one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Themes surrounding (a) college-going motivations, (b) college-going and transition processes, and (c) collegiate experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care emerged after analysis of interview data. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Introduction

Black youth are overrepresented in the United States foster care system. Indeed, while Blacks represent just 13 percent of the total populations, Black youth make up 24% of the 402,378 youth in the foster care system (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Each year, more than 200,000 of these youth exit the foster care system with expectations of leading successful and productive lives after they exit the foster care system. However, statistical evidence paints a woefully different picture.

Youth transitioning out of foster care face significant challenges. Financial hardships, insufficient health care arrangements, homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment meet foster youth exiting the foster care system at alarming rates (Reilly, 2003). Educational statistics for foster youth are equally disconcerting. Studies have shown that just 43% of foster youth aspire to a 4-year degree, compared to 67% of their non-foster youth counterparts (Kirk, Lewis-

Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Additionally, just 20% of foster youth who graduate from high school enroll in college, while 60% of non-foster youth enroll in college (Wolanin, 2005).

Studies estimate that just 1 to 11% of all foster youth attain a college degree (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Wolanin, 2005).

Similarly, educational statistics for Black males are dismal. Black males are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and graduate from college than their Black female and White male counterparts (Harper, 2006). Additionally, Black men have seen little progress over the past 40 years in educational attainment statistics compared to their Black female and White male counterparts (Harper, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).

The idea that both Black male students and youth from foster care backgrounds exhibit extremely low educational attainment numbers raises concerns about students who identify as Black male collegians formerly in foster care. Black males and foster youth represent two populations in which educational attainment are in a state of crisis, yet research on Black male foster care youth in college (BMFCCs) is extremely limited. Thus, this study sought to address the gap in research surrounding Black male collegians formerly in foster care.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how BMFCCs make meaning of their experiences in the foster care system. Additionally, this study investigated the impact these meaning-making processes had on the college-going and college-transition processes, as well as the collegiate experiences of BMFCCs. Three questions guided this study:

- (a) What challenges do BMFCCs face during the college-going and college-transition processes?
- (b) What challenges do BMFCCs face during their collegiate careers?

(c) What factors aid BMFCCs in achieving academic and social success in college?

Review of Literature

This study seeks to investigate the experiences of BMFCCs. Accordingly, I review literature on Black male collegians, and college students from foster care backgrounds.

What We Know About Black Male Collegians

Research on Black men in college reveals dismal statistics regarding college entry, collegiate experiences, and degree attainment. To begin, just 47% of Black men graduate from high school on time compared to 78% of their White male counterparts (Harper, 2012). Additionally Black male students enter college underprepared for the academic and social rigors associated with higher education (Harper, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).

While college enrollment continues to rise nationally, Black male collegians have seen little progress in access and degree attainment (Harper, 2006). The number of Black students earning college degrees has risen, but gender disparities exist, as Black women outnumber Black men two to one in college (Cuyjet, 2006). Furthermore, two-thirds of Black male college students fail to graduate within three years.

A myriad of factors contribute to Black male attrition. Background traits and academic preparation play a significant role in Black males' success in college, as measured by GPA (Strayhorn, 2014). Additionally, hostile racial climates (Strayhorn, 2012), difficulties finding spaces for involvement and engagement (Harper 2012), as well as spaces for Black identity expression (Guiffrida, 2006; Harper, 2012), and a dearth supportive relationships (Strayhorn, 2008) contribute to Black male attrition from college.

Research on Black male self-authorship development is limited. However, extant literature suggests that self-authorship measures are a significant predictor of Black student success. Strayhorn (2014) found that first-year Black students at HBCUs who exhibited lower degrees of autonomous thinking had higher levels of achievement, as measured by GPA.

What We Know About Foster Youth in College

There are an estimated 402,378 youth in the United State foster care system (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Findings from extant literature surrounding former foster youth's collegiate experiences and outcomes is staggering. Studies show that just 20% of college-eligible foster youth enroll in college, compared to 60% of their non-foster youth counterparts (Wolanin, 2005). For former foster youth that attend college, there are several barriers to academic and social success. Foster youth who enter college are often unprepared for academic rigors due, in part, to displacements that interrupt their educational trajectories, as well as low academic expectations (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilson, 2011; Wolanin, 2005). Additionally, students from foster care backgrounds often lack the social and cultural capital necessary to navigate collegiate settings (Dworsky & Perez, 2009).

Other factors play an important role in persistence for collegians from foster care backgrounds. Stigmatization as a result of foster youth identities affect the educational decisions of collegians from foster care background (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer, 2014). Additionally, while former foster youth aspire to college at high rates, express stronger desires to complete their degrees, and believe they are academically prepared for college, foster care alumni in college are more likely to withdraw from first semester courses and perform significantly lower academically, as measured by GPA (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012).

Like research on Black males, research on self-authorship development of foster youth is limited. However, extant literature on self-authorship development of high risk students broadly, of which foster youth are a subpopulation, suggests that high risk students may develop self-authored ways of knowing prior to entering college as a result of provocative experiences, or those experiences that challenge their ways of knowing, causing cognitive disequilibrium.

Higher education scholarship has devoted attention to achievement disparities for Black male collegians, but such attention to foster youth is scarce. Additionally, while self-authorship development in high-risk students has received attention in literature, self-authorship development for Black men and foster youth has received very little attention in extant literature. This study provides an initial investigation into the experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care and their development of self-authored ways of knowing. Before discussing the methods that were employed, I give an overview of the theory that guided this study.

Theoretical Framework

Self-authorship theory guided several aspects of this qualitative study, including instrument development and data analysis. Self-authorship, as a theoretical framework, is a developmental theory which provides a lens through which meaning-making processes can be explored. Self-authorship refers to “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Self-authorship development occurs within three dimensions: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. That is, self-authored individuals recognize the complex, contextual nature of knowledge (cognitive), use internal formulas to balance the recognition and understanding of their own desires, beliefs, fears, goals, and sense of self (intrapersonal), with those of others (interpersonal).

There are three major stages along the continuum that is self-authorship development. Individuals begin by using external formulas, such as the beliefs and expectations of others, to guide their behaviors. During the first stage of self-authorship development, *the crossroads*, individuals experience moments of intense cognitive dissonance, during which they question external formulas. The crossroads is marked by dissatisfaction with externally defined ways of knowing. During the second stage, *becoming the author of one's life*, individuals actively seek new ways of knowing in order to develop new internal perspectives. Finally, during *internal foundations*, the final stage in self-authorship development, individuals possess internally defined ways of knowing. That is, individuals at this stage of self-authorship development use internal voices to shape and define their own beliefs, goals, desires, and fears.

The development of self-authorship depends on a variety of factors including personal characteristics, experiences, and environmental contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Thus, self-authorship development may occur at various points in life for varying individuals and populations. Pizzolato (2003) posits that social privilege is a factor in self-authorship development, and that college-going aspirations for high-risk students, such as Black male foster youth, may be spurred by the development of self-authored ways of knowing. For these populations, self-authorship development may occur before college as a result of life circumstances and provocative events. Thus, self-authorship seemed an appropriate and useful framework through which the experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care should be viewed.

High risk populations, such as foster youth, enter college facing a myriad of barriers to becoming their possible selves, even after they have developed a commitment to achieving the possible self they desire, or avoiding the possible self that they fear (Pizzolato, 2003). The

possible self is defined as an individual's ideas of who they might become. Possible selves may occur in multiple domains of the self, and are shaped by a number of factors, including who the individual *wants* to become and who the individual *fears* becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). That is, one may envision the academic possible self (e.g., the possible self that attends college and attains a degree), or possible self in the domain of wellness (e.g., one that exercises often, eats a balanced diet, and gets adequate sleep).

The role that possible selves play in self-authorship development for high risk populations, such as foster youth, is critical. One's idea of their possible self is sufficient to drive their behavior. Thus, understanding the possible self-development, and the provocative experiences, of Black male collegians formerly in foster care, may provide insight into the development of self-authored ways of knowing for these students (Pizzolato, 2003).

Method

Purposeful sampling strategies were utilized to identify Black male students of color from foster care backgrounds (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). To qualify for this study, participants must have (a) identified as a Black male, (b) been an alumni of the foster care system, and (c) been enrolled in, or recently graduated from (within 3 years), a degree-granting institution of higher education. Participants were recruited through various offices and partnerships, including the institution's diversity and inclusion office and Black student organizations and centers, to name a few. Potential participants were contacted by email and invited to participate in a one-time, one-on-one interview. Additional study participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), in which study participants are asked to recommend other Black male collegians formerly in foster care for participation. All participants ($n = 11$) agreed to participate in interviews for this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected using one-time, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were 45 to 90 minutes in length, with the average interview lasting 60 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions designed to elicit information regarding the participants' educational and personal background, transition into college, and collegiate experiences, to name a few. All interviews were recorded and subsequently professionally transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (CCM) of analysis (Glaser, 1965). CCM is a three-step process. First, interview transcripts were read and re-read to generate emerging themes, a process known as open coding. Next, in a process known as axial coding, related codes were combined and renamed so that new names reflected the underlying combination of codes. Finally, after the axial coding process was completed, a list of themes was created that represented the major findings of the study.

In qualitative research, credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability are four metrics by which rigor and accuracy can be evaluated (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). During this study, member checking and secure storage of data for subsequent review ensured credibility. Additionally, debriefings were held before and following interviews to discuss preliminary ideas and interpretations. Transferability was maintained by the thorough recording of participants, interview sites, and contextual backgrounds. Finally, dependability and confirmability were ensured through maintenance of detailed study procedures and data audits, wherein research team members not affiliated with this project examined results and processes to ensure accuracy.

Findings

Findings from the data analysis process described above were categorized under three key foci: (a) college-going motivations, (b) college-going and college-transition processes, and (c) collegiate experiences. That is, participants connected their experiences in the foster care system to their desires to attend and succeed in college, speaking at length about the role their experiences in foster care played in their college-going motivations. Additionally, participants noted the role that their foster care backgrounds played in their difficult college-going processes and during the transition to college. Finally, participants noted that, while they were alumni of the foster care system in college, their identity and past experiences as foster youth still affected their experiences in college.

College-Going Motivations: Looking Back to Create the Possible Self

Participants in this study spoke about the role that their pre-college educational backgrounds, as well as their foster care experiences, played in their desires to attend college, shaping their possible selves. Specifically, BMFCCs (a) felt that they must “break a cycle” and avoid, moving toward a more positive view of their possible selves and (b) felt a sense of social responsibility and a need to “give back” to their community as a result of their experiences in foster care, reflecting a desire to positively impact the possible selves of others.

The desire to attain the possible self is sufficient for driving behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Indeed, the participants in this study cited considering both their goals and fears as the impetus for pursuing college. For instance, Khalio connected his family’s collective lack of education to a lack of opportunities, stating:

All I had to do was look at my life and the things that had transpired, making connections between education and opportunities... My mother

didn't graduate high school. My uncle didn't graduate high school. My auntie didn't graduate from high school... You need an education. That is extremely important for you to get as much education as you can to be prepared to take advantage of opportunities. [With an education] you do the things you want to do. You have a better life.

Here, Khalio considered both his goals and fears when deciding to pursue college. That is, Khalio feared the consequences of failing to pursue higher education and saw college as an opportunity to avoid negative outcomes experienced by his family.

Like Khalio, other participants recalled using their surroundings to visualize and construct their possible selves. These students were keenly aware of the issues facing their high schools, families, and communities, and chose college as an avenue for positive change. For example, Kevin, when asked about his college-going motivations, stated:

I figured out my wonderful high school was a mess and that we should do something to change it, so college and education was apparently the way to make change happen... Going to college was a motivation to get out of the hood and do something different and hopefully return to the hood and something to make a change...Do something for my school. Do something for my family.

Students in this study used their previous experiences to shape their future purpose. Said differently, these students used their past to reshape and pursue their more positive *possible selves*. Thus, experiences in the foster care system played an important role in shaping of the possible selves of BMFCCs, and acted as an important catalyst in their college-going aspirations.

Supporting Black Male Foster Youth during the College-Going Process and Transition

Extant literature supports claims that social and cultural capital play critical roles in students' decision to attend college, college-going and college-transition processes, and college choice (McDonough, 1994; Perna, 2006). However, analysis of data from this study suggested that BMFCCs had very little, if any, of this capital to rely on during their college-going process and transition. As a result, these students must seek other resources in order to successfully navigate the college-going process. Lamar noted:

People in my family hadn't even graduated high school, so the college process, what it took to get in, what it took to be successful once you got there, getting money once you got there, all of those things, were extremely new to me.

Again, we see the recurring theme of familial educational attainment playing a role, this time, in BMFCCs' knowledge in navigating the college-choice, college-going, and college-transition processes. With little to no social and cultural capital to rely on during the college-going and college-transition processes, BMFCCs in this study relied, instead, on resources provided by their high school campuses, including college resource rooms, advisors, and mentors, to name a few. Still, these resources may not be wholly adequate in preparing Black male foster youth for the college-going process. Khalio, for example, recalled how his high school's college resource room was instrumental, but still inadequate, in getting him to college:

I spent a lot of time in our college resources room in high school. We had one, but I really had no idea what I was looking for. Thinking back on it, I really had no good sense... I had no idea how I was going to pay for anything. This was never a conversation with anyone in the family, and I didn't expect it would be.

Additionally, the transition into college was a time of unique difficulty for participants in this study. Many participants noted various resources and aid provided to them as they began to matriculate to college; however, while useful, participants also spoke at length about hidden competencies needed to successfully navigate the transition into college. Nathaniel stated:

I didn't realize how close or how fast things would approach you in terms of transitioning because the focus is always 'get them into school'...But no one really talks about the process of transitioning from being in a structured environment to now having freedom to go out and make decisions on your own or the preparation to do so. So my house-mother and father basically talked to me... and had to show me how to write checks, and open up a bank account, because there was no real program in place.

Nathaniel's experience navigating the college transition is not unique among the participants in this study. Indeed, other participants noted their lack of preparation and knowledge necessary to start college successfully. Specifically, participants noted that, while in foster care, choice and autonomy were rare, making the sudden autonomy provided by college difficult to manage. Lamar noted:

Understanding that now...I am in control of [my] own destiny...control of my own finances, control of my time, and control of my own behavior. All of that factored in. I'm basically in control of my own life. Being able to do that is why it [college] is the best thing that ever happened in my life. It was the first time in my life where I was... you can say I was 100% responsible for all of the outcomes.

Autonomy and choice were completely new experiences for participants in this study, and this idea caused instability and dissonance for many participants, making the

college transition all the more difficult. Transitioning into the culture of higher education, its setting, language, and practices, can be challenging for any student, but for Black male collegians formerly in foster care, these challenges carry unique weight, as these students lack the knowledge regarding resources to aid in their transitions. Difficulties managing the transition into college may have a lasting impact on the collegiate experiences of Black male foster care alumni, and this particular area of the collegiate experience warrants further investigation.

Collegiate Experiences of Black Males from Foster Care Backgrounds

Analysis of data from this study suggest that, once on campus, BMFCCs face significant challenges. Specifically, BMFCCs (a) feel isolated as a result of both their identity as Black men and their experiences in foster care, (b) lack knowledge of the resources necessary for navigating times of hardship, and (c) often worry about meeting basic needs, such as housing and healthcare.

Forming interpersonal relationships on campus with peers, faculty, and staff is a critical component of self-authorship development (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Indeed, development of self-authored ways of knowing rely on the presences of, and progression in, the interpersonal dimension of self-authorship. However, participants in this study noted feelings of isolation on campus as a result of both their identity as Black men, and their identity as foster care alumni. For example, when asked to describe his experiences in college, Joseph, a student from a predominantly white, Christian institution, stated:

It was a majority white [school]. I had never gone to a school where it was majority white. It was a very difficult culture shock. There were multiple times

where I had to confront my teachers because of things they said. It is a very scary thing to confront a professor on something said about color.

Joseph's experiences of isolation and shock were a result of his race in the context of a predominantly white institution; however, study participants' feelings of isolation in college also occurred along other dimensions of identity, such as that of being an alumni of the foster care system. Participants often noted a lack of supportive academic and social resources, and they connected their lack of resources to difficulties in college. Kevin, for example, stated:

I talked to my aunt several times about dropping out...Fall quarter was really rough...Winter quarter I saw improvement because I figured it out. I need to get tutoring. I need help. I have to start asking questions. I tapped into all the resources available that I didn't take advantage of, which is a cry for help. I just need help. Somebody help. That was when I found out about all of the great mentoring programs.

Further, experiences in the foster care system directly impacted feelings of belonging and connectedness. That is, youth from foster care backgrounds have a set of unique characteristics and experiences that may cause feelings of isolation on campus. For example, Benny shared:

The education director to the orphanage drove me over and dropped me off. I had everything I needed to start. Then, when the roommate comes in and his mom is like 'Oh, so where are your parents?' It kind of shook me a little bit because I was like 'this is not what I picture.'

Feelings of isolation on campus are certainly not unique to BMFCCs; however student participants in this study expressed a desire for belonging and connectedness with other peers that identified as foster care alumni:

I don't think there's enough being talked about foster peer-to-peer support in order to raise funding and keep people connected...Starting an alumni association can do just that, but it's hard for me to sell the idea.

While belonging for Black male collegians formerly in foster care represents a significant challenge, barriers to success extended well beyond a lack of interpersonal connectedness. Data from this study suggest that BMFCCs spend significant time and energy worrying about basic needs such as housing, food, and health care. Indeed, participants remarked about the various times in which they went without, or feared going without, many of their basic needs. For example, Benny noted worrying about living arrangements during holiday breaks. Other worried about meals. Nearly all of our participants noted financial fears. For example, Nathaniel shared:

I had to learn that on my own. Where to stay during breaks? That's why I transferred to so many schools, because I had to rely on financial aid to eat, you know. Sleeping on people's floors, driving back and forth, working at nursing homes. Doing everything that you can do just to stay above water. Literally fighting.

Meeting basic human needs for food, housing, money, and belonging, are critical to the success of all students in college. The fact that many participants in this study noted worrying constantly about all of these needs is alarming, and warrants attention from administrators, policy makers, and student affairs professionals.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are multifold. First, as stated before, college enrollment, retention, and completion for both Black males and foster youth are abysmally low. Thus the population of Black male collegians from foster care backgrounds, by extension, is small. As such, we recruited participants from various institutions. This meant that participants did not all participate in the foster care system in the same state and during the same time period. Foster care policies differ across states, and policies that affect the lived experiences of foster youth change over time. Thus, it is difficult to point to any one policy or practice that may negatively impact the experiences of foster youth. Still, the common experiences of these youth provide an appropriate lens for analysis of barriers to academic attainment for foster youth broadly, and Black male foster youth specifically.

Discussion

Recall that the purpose of this study was to explore how Black male collegians formerly in foster care make meaning of their experiences in the foster care system, and the impact their meaning-making processes play on their college experiences. Put another way, we asked, how do BMFCCs develop self-authored ways of knowing, and what impact do self-authored ways of knowing play on their collegiate experiences.

Findings from this study suggest that personal backgrounds, including the lack of familial educational capital and negative social experiences, play a significant role in the college-going motivations of BMFCCs. That is, BMFCCs in this study made meaning of their pre-college experiences by concluding that higher education was the best, if not the only, way to escape negative environments. This finding is consistent with previous research on self-authorship development of high risk students (Pizzolato, 2003). Consistent with the findings of previous

researchers, BMFCCs develop self-authored ways of knowing prior to college, which serve as a catalyst for their college-going motivations.

Furthermore, findings from this study suggests that BMFCCs feel isolated from others on college campuses as a result of both their race and experiences in foster care. Again, this is consistent with previous research on Black males in college, which suggest that Black men feel isolated as a result of a lack of same-race peers, as well as a dearth of opportunities and spaces for racial identity expression (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). The added identity of foster care alumni only served to increase feelings of social isolation for participants in this study. This finding is significant, as it implies that multiple domains of identity impact the social experiences of BMFCCs.

Findings from this study extend what we know from extant literature regarding foster youths' difficulty with meeting basic needs, such as housing, health care, and finances, after exiting the foster care system (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Wolanin, 2005). Participants' experiences with insufficient housing, health care, and other basic needs is particularly alarming. Even in college, BMFCCs find themselves worrying about meeting the same basic needs. This is alarming, as many of these students seek college as a vehicle to escape difficult situations, but find similar difficulties during their collegiate experiences. These findings have important implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Findings from this study have several implications. First, it is recommended that institutional leaders and policy makers review policies and practices to ensure that they do not leave BMFCCs, and indeed, all students, without basic needs. Housing and dining policies, as well as financial aid policies, represent two major areas of concern for this population, and

warrant attention. Providing students with housing and dining services over breaks, as well as educating students on financial aid and financial literacy education is critical to BMFCCs success in college.

Furthermore, findings from this study suggest that BMFCC's feelings of isolation from others on college campuses as a result of their experiences in foster care negatively impact their academic and social integration. Administrators and practitioners may address this by creating spaces for foster care alumni in which students are able to create relationships with peers of similar backgrounds and experiences. Furthermore, practitioners should tailor these spaces on their respective campuses to address institution specific needs of foster care alumni.

Finally, future research should expand this study to include women and foster youth of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds. Extant literature suggests that college-going motivations, college choice, and collegiate experiences differ across race, gender, educational contexts, and other background characteristics. This study suggests that experiences in foster care motivate Black male foster youth to attend college. Thus, future research should explore the role that varying background characteristics, coupled with experiences in foster care, play on experiences in college for foster youth. Experiences that are specific to foster youth, such as the number of moves and manner of exit (e.g., age out, adoption), warrant additional investigation.

Conclusion

This study extends extant literature regarding the experiences of foster youth after their exit from the foster care system. Understanding the unique barriers to success, as well as those resources and interventions which engender the success of Black male collegians formerly in foster care, is critical. The college-going motivations, as well as the transition and collegiate experiences, of Black male collegians formerly in foster care provide insight into how

practitioners may promote and enhance the academic success of students from this high risk population.

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