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Factors Impeding the Social and Academic Progress of African American Males in Foster Care

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and analyze factors that impede the social and academic achievement of African American males in foster care. The aim was to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges these male African American students face and identify the barriers preventing them from achieving a comparable level of social and academic success as their counterparts from traditional homes. The research also sought to identify potential remedies for these challenges. Critical Race Theory was used as the theoretical framework for the study. Findings showed that African American males in foster care face a number of challenges to their success, including racism, low expectations, and a lack of social/family support. The findings also revealed several interventions, such as mentoring, extracurricular activities, and increased interaction with biological family members that can promote resiliency in these African American males and assist them in addressing barriers to success.

Keywords: African American males, foster care youth & academic success.

African American males in foster care encounter many dire issues that inhibit their social and academic progress, such as problems within the child welfare system, high suspension rates, and low graduation rates, which plague them not only during their school age years, but into adulthood as well. While academic woes are not unique to African American males in foster care, in conjunction with the myriad other issues facing them, academic challenges further exacerbate the difficulties they face. Additionally, African American males in foster care are even more at risk for academic failure than the general population of foster youth (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008). African American males are the exclusive focus of this research because of the gloomy outcomes and overall challenges faced by this population.

Specifically, African American males are overrepresented in foster care when compared to their non-black counterparts. As of 2012, African American males were more than twice as likely to be placed in foster care than males from other ethnic groups, with African American males making up 10.71 out of every 1,000 entrants into foster care, compared to 5.24 for all male children (Miller, Farrow, Meltzer, & Notkin, 2014). Because of the circumstances involved in placing children in foster care, resiliency, self-efficacy and scholastic aptitude begin to suffer (Lyman & Bird, 1996). According to Lyman and Bird (1996), the preponderance of these children entered

foster care due to a considerable increase in parental methamphetamine use. Relatedly, an estimated 80 to 90% of foster care placements are attributable to some kind of substance abuse (Lyman & Bird, 1996). Further, placement in permanent homes is less likely for African American males than for their non-black peers, leading to substantially longer stays in foster care (Miller, Farrow, Meltzer, & Notkin, 2014). Placement and prolonged tenure in foster care can have a causal impact on school performance, as academic achievement is positively correlated with self-efficacy in children (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1984).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify and analyze factors that impede the successful social and academic achievement of African American males in foster care. Social achievement is defined as progress towards acquisition of prosocial skills that aim towards African American males in foster care becoming productive members of society. Academic achievement is defined as progress towards completion of high school. The study was designed to answer the following two research questions: What are the factors affecting social and academic achievement of African American males in foster care? What specific practices and strategies positively influence the academic achievement of African American males while in foster care? This research explored societal and academic challenges of African American males in foster care and examined potential remedies to those challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided this study with a lens for analyzing societal and academic challenges faced by African American foster children. CRT is a theoretical view that posits race as the nexus of life in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Furthermore, CRT is an academic perspective that implores readers to consider the existing relationships between race, the justice system, and society. CRT is used in many well-established academic fields including anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, law, politics, and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In particular, the findings for this study were evaluated by applying the CRT tenets of *ordinariness* and *differential racialization* for the purposes of critiquing why social and academic difficulties exist and how they can effectively be addressed.

CRT asserts that *ordinariness*, which means that racism is difficult to cure or address, is pernicious to people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Color-blind or formal conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination, such as the refusal to hire a qualified person of color rather than hire a white high school dropout. *Differential racialization* is an aspect of CRT contending that no person exists as a single, unitary identity, and that individuals often have conflicting, overlapping identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For example, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), an individual can be an African American, a feminist, a mother, a democrat and a student. This feature of CRT debunks the notion that minorities are one, singular identity and, therefore, easy to identify and typecast (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Literature Review

While African American males in foster care are not qualitatively different from their peers in traditional homes, the levels of social and academic achievement between the groups are important enough to merit explication and examination. According to Park and Ryan (2009), African-American males in the child welfare system are more likely than their peers to have mental health and other emotional challenges, compounded with low academic achievement, delinquency, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse. Additionally, perhaps due to their experiences in foster care,

African American males in foster care are more likely to be incarcerated for violent and criminal behavior as juveniles and adults.

Moreover, African American males are more likely to be retained a grade in school and are more likely to drop out of school than their white peers (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz & Casserly, 2010). Adding to these difficulties, African American males are imprisoned at rates greater than their nonblack peers. These factors create a framework for the problems that await African American males in the foster care system.

According to Jones (2012), the two primary factors that converge to inhibit the progress of African American males in foster care are (a) maltreatment of foster youth and (b) the length of stay in care. These challenges create an unusually difficult dynamic for African American males that not only leads to turbulence in their social environments, but also inhibits African American males' ability to effectively interact with their teachers and peer group in school settings (Jones, 2012).

Maltreatment

Children who are maltreated have a greater propensity than their peers to demonstrate an inability to focus and, consequently, have more problems in school (Wolfe, 1987). According to Eckenrode (1993), maltreatment can take the form of physical or emotional trauma to the child; this treatment can create conditions that lead to a disproportionate number of foster students being suspended from school and may also result in grade retention and placement in low level classes (Eckenrode, 1993). Miller, Farrow, Meltzer, and Notkin (2014) reported that for most African American males in foster care, neglect-related experiences account for the preponderance of the maltreatment, with sexual abuse, physical abuse, medical neglect, and abandonment chief among the problems. They further reported that neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment for African American males until age three, while physical abuse is employed more often for older youth, especially between the ages of 8-15. An example of this can be found in Los Angeles County, where many of the annual average of 350-400 deaths are connected to suspected child abuse; approximately 20-25 percent of the decedents are African American, with more than 60 percent of those children being males (Miller, Farrow, Meltzer, & Notkin, 2014). To further illustrate this point, Ryan, Testa and Zhai (2008) conducted a research project in which they studied more than 1,500 African American males in foster care between the ages of 8-20 to determine the effectiveness of foster care guardianship. Of the more than 1,500 youth surveyed, all children had at least one instance of substantiated maltreatment or abuse at the hands of a guardian. Abuse in this study ranged from neglect to sexual abuse.

Length of Stay in Care

African American male children are confronted with numerous tribulations that lead to lengthier and even permanent stays in out-of-home care, in comparison to their counterparts (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2007; Jones, 2012). According to Needell, Barbara, Brookhart, and Lee (2004), the length of stay for African American males in foster care is substantially longer than that of their peers. As of 2012, African American males had a 28-month average length of stay in out-of-home care, while the average length of stay for all children is 22 months (Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In 2000, 44% of the African American males who entered foster care left within one year, compared to 52% in 2007 (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2007). The length of time African American males spend in foster care is important because children who are placed for long periods

of time are at considerable risk of developing behavioral and psychological issues (Marinkovic & Backovic, 2007). According to Conger and Rebeck (2001), foster youth with longer lengths of stay are likely to experience a greater number of school transfers. Conger and Rebeck's (2001) study essentially found that transient behavior had a variegated impact on scholastic aptitude. The study showed that school transfers were not significantly linked to reading achievement, but had a minute, depressing effect on mathematics achievement. Conger and Rebeck (2001) also found that a stronger forecaster of school achievement was school attendance, which is adversely impacted by multiple placements.

Furthermore, Conger and Rebeck (2001) also reported that youth with shorter stays in foster care are twice as likely to re-enter foster care than those who stay longer their first time in care. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act was established to accelerate the permanent placement of children in foster care (O'Flynn, 1999). This edict also required states to "initiate termination of parental rights proceedings after the child has been in foster care 15 of the previous 22 months, except if not in the best interest of the child, or if the child is in the care of a relative" (Vesneski, 2011, p. 17). Many critics of the Adoption and Safe Families Act cite the establishment of this law as particularly injurious to African American males, many of whom have been permanently separated from their biological family members as a direct consequence of this act.

Methods

The data were gathered over a five-month period using two different methods: (a) in-person one-hour focus groups and (b) an online questionnaire. First, a qualitative instrument was created to glean information about the experiences of African American males in foster care. This instrument, used as a protocol for conducting the focus groups, began with five closed-ended, demographic questions. The subsequent nine open-ended questions were designed to elicit participants' beliefs about the foster care system, ideas about the relationships with family, and perspectives regarding those most supportive of the participant.

The online survey also posed 14 questions. The first five demographic questions were identical to the focus group protocol; however, the next seven questions were changed to a 5-point Likert scale orientation, and the final two were open-ended questions. Examples of the Likert scale questions are: (a) My educational experiences were different because I was in foster care, and (b) My educational experiences were different because I am African American.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected from contacts made with Independent Living Skills Programs (ILSP). These programs assist foster youth with transitioning between foster care and adulthood. Specifically, these programs assist former foster youth with securing housing, procuring life skills, enrollment into college, and support with employment opportunities. After contacting all 56 ILSP's in California, agreement to support the study was received from representatives in San Francisco and Kern Counties. Purposive, criterion-based sampling was used to select participants for this study. According to Patton and Patton (1990), when a population is selected for research based upon specific characteristics they share, the researcher has used purposive sampling. The criteria for participant selection were (a) African American, (b) males, and (c) had spent at least one year in foster care between the ages of 9 and 18. Attempts were made to contact 100 potential participants, and of this number, 38 former foster youth agreed to participate in the study. The online survey was paired with the focus group option to provide convenience for subjects unable to attend the focus groups sessions. In all, 26 participants

responded to the online instrument, and 12 participated in the two focus groups (seven and five participants respectively).

Findings and Discussion

In answering the research questions for this study, the researcher found that some of the focus group and online survey questions generated profound answers towards the end goal. The three most beneficial questions were: In what ways were your teachers, social workers, biological and or foster family supportive to you in reaching your educational goals? Was your experience or relationships with your teachers, counselors or coaches positive or negative? How do you feel your educational experience was different because you were African American? These questions were also reflected in the responses to the online survey. These three questions are used to frame the report of findings and are referred to as Question 1, 2, and 3.

Question 1. There were several telling and poignant responses to Question 1: In what ways were your teachers, social workers, biological and or foster family supportive to you in reaching your educational goals? A parallel question asked on the online survey was: My teachers, social workers, biological and or foster family were supportive of my education. On the Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the strongly agree and 1 completely disagree, 6 marked 1 (strongly disagree), 2 two marked 3 (somewhat agree), and 19 marked 5 (strongly disagree). The primary theme that emerged from the data was *lack of social/biological support*, which generally meant that African American males in foster care had a lack of support and required more support to aid them in their educational endeavors. Many of the responses to this question helped supply texture and context for better understanding the importance of role models in the lives of African American males in foster care. One participant stated:

I never got visits. When I got taken out of my house, my grandmother would never come and visit me with my brothers and sisters. This made me real pissed. I started smokin' weed one time when my grandmother was supposed to show up. I was freakin' mad, man.

This participant then provided additional context for the influence of family members as well as his teachers.

I used to see my friends smoking and hanging out and I used to think they were dumb. I really appreciate my grandmother for how she always collected my brothers and sisters and me after we were taken away. She kept us together when my mom couldn't. I also had some great teachers who used to encourage me to do the right things and to stay out of trouble. My favorite teachers were the ones who used to be a little mean to me because they showed me that they cared about me and my progress.

Another participant, a longtime foster care resident, described his unfavorable experiences with a foster family.

It was obvious they didn't trust me. They would always lock up the cabinets whenever they left the house. Plus, they never helped me with homework or anything. To this day, I hate math because it was too hard for me when I was in 7th grade in foster care. I used to be good at it, too!

Nearly all participants expressed displeasure and lack of support. One participant elucidated a perceived lack of support: "My social worker was racist. She always called me by my last name and never looked me in the face. I hated her." This quote and the previous two illustrate the importance of support structures for African American males in foster care.

The representative quotes responding to Question 1 also demonstrate the aspect of CRT entitled *differential racialization*, which means that each of these individuals are distinct and have their own identities. Although the young men in this study had similar circumstances, they interpreted and internalized their experiences in different ways.

Question 2. Question 2 asked: Was your experience or relationships with your teachers, counselors or coaches positive or negative? A parallel question from the online survey was in the form of a statement as follows: I had positive experiences with my school counselors, teachers and coaches. The data showed that the respondents, overall, felt a lack of positive relationships with their teachers and adult supporters. As stated by one participant, “I don’t think teachers expected that much out of me.” One participant expressed similar sentiments but also suggested something more ominous.

My teachers never really thought I was as smart as the other kids, my White ones anyway. Now, though, I wish I had more Black teachers. Back then, there were so many White people that I started to wish I was White, too.

This participant alluded to a prejudice harbored by White teachers, in addition to a desire on the part of the participant to become White. While some respondents mentioned favorable relations with family and school staff members, the overarching theme was a lack of positivity in their interactions with their support network. This perceived lack of positivity is likely a consequence of the CRT facet known as *ordinariness*, which means that racism is difficult to cure. The embedded and protracted normalcy of strained relations between African Americans and school personnel, in particular, is in accordance with *ordinariness*. This aspect of CRT asserts that brand of racism or mistreatment towards African Americans is normal and a regular feature in society.

Question 3. Question 3 asked: How do you feel your educational experience was different because you were African American? A parallel statement from the online survey stated: My educational experiences were different because I am African American. The data from Question 3 revealed that many participants observed subtle and conspicuous examples of racism; thus, racism emerged as a theme. The participants suggested that teachers, social workers and others were guilty of perpetrating racism. The data also revealed that participants were keenly aware of the expectation that they were expected to drop out of school, have wayward social behavior, and end up incarcerated because of their conduct. As another example of institutional racism, CRT would also characterize this thinking as difficult to cure and deeply embedded in society’s psyche because it is a long standing practice in American society to vilify and scapegoat African American males (Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2007). One participant noted, “It’s kind of like, a lot of times, you go from this system and into the prison system.” Another participant stated, “I think my experiences were different because of how people looked at me and because of how I started to look at myself.” He goes on to say, “Some people, like my teachers, would only choose other students for special projects and assignments. I always felt like the outsider.” Comments such as the foregoing provide insight into the thinking African American males in foster care concerning their self-concept while within foster care.

After carefully scrutinizing the responses to each focus group and online survey question, the researcher grouped responses into categories and labeled them with the following emergent themes: *lack of support* and *racism*. Many of the respondents indicated a perceived lack of support from teachers, social workers, and family, making this theme consistent throughout the responses.

Additionally, the theme of racism was explicitly stated in several instances. There were also implicit references to institutional racism; however, in some instances, the respondents made allusions to the phenomenon, rather than clearly expressing the term. In those instances, respondents would make comments such as, "I went to a White school," which led this researcher to infer an overarching belief in institutional/structural racism.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Each of the three key focus group questions culled from the research data provided a glimpse into the issues hindering African American males in foster care and provides insight into potential remedies to those issues. Question 1 asked: In what ways were your teachers, social workers, biological and or foster family supportive to you in reaching your educational goals? Overall, the respondents stated they felt unsupported by teachers, social workers, and family members. Respondents who cited support reported telephone calls, visits and letters from family members and positive interactions with school staff members as the most powerful forms of support in furthering their educational pursuits.

Question 2 asked: Was your experience or relationships with your teachers, counselors or coaches positive or negative? Some participants remarked their experiences were favorable due to a nurturing and supportive coach or teacher, while others stated that supportive school staff members, such as lunch ladies, were important in helping them to have positive experiences. Conversely, some stated they had negative experiences with school staff, namely teachers. Overall, the data show negative relationships with support networks.

Question 3 asked: How do you feel your educational experience was different because you were African American? Several participants cited incidents of racism in response to this question. Many respondents also commented there was a lack of demonstrable concern shown toward them, which, if present, could have helped them to develop a greater sense of resilience. Overall, respondents expressed immense racism directed towards them and felt undervalued primarily because of their race.

Research question 1: What are the factors affecting social and academic achievement of African American males in foster care? In response to research question one, the data reveal the primary factors affecting African American males in foster care are a severe lack of familial, school and foster care support and institutional racism.

Research question 2: What specific practices and strategies positively influence the academic achievement African American males while in foster care?

One strategy for positively influencing African American males in foster care to achieve academically is to have a mentor or resource to help them successfully maneuver educational terrain. Given the discrimination and racism many participants described, a mentor who could supply academic and social advice would arguably prove beneficial. Students at local high schools or colleges could be recruited to mentor African American male foster youth. Often these high school and college students are seeking extra credit or community service hours that can be met by providing tutoring/mentoring foster youth.

A second suggested practice is for all African American male foster youth to be involved in some extracurricular activity, such as sports, music or academic pursuits (e.g. academic pentathlons or spelling bees), with the primary goal of being the promotion of resilience. According to Goldstein and Huff (1993), extracurricular activities serve as a significant deterrent to wayward activities and promote self-awareness and resiliency. Further, adults should also become well acquainted with research detailing the potential benefits of participation in

extracurricular activities. In this way, adults can have meaningful, honest discussions with foster youth concerning extracurricular involvement.

Third, African American males in foster care should be afforded weekly access to a child welfare employee of color who would make regular inquiries into the foster youth's academic and social progress. Specifically, a culturally sensitive, culturally responsive employee devoted to assisting children should be provided. Several respondents stated their case worker was racist or insensitive, so this intervention could mitigate those complaints. This child welfare employee should also make regular, earnest attempts to facilitate communication between the child and their biological family, to the extent that it is possible and legal. Collectively, these recommendations would help promote success and engender social and academic resilience in African American males in foster care.

Recommendations for future research are to continue focusing on the challenges faced by African American males in foster care. Extensive studies in this area will bring greater attention to the challenges these students face, as well as recommendations for improving their plight. Further, future studies also should target the needs of the biological family members of African American males in foster care, such as providing counseling to families or otherwise helping to facilitate family reunification and prevent permanent loss of a child from the familial structure. This research could help to inform educational and social services professionals about effective techniques for assisting this population. Further, this researcher also recommends using CRT as a lens through which to evaluate any progress made by potential reforms to the foster care system. Through feedback from former foster youth and with critical analysis of newfound data, incrementally, insensitive practices and structural racism can be eradicated from the system.

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