Mentoring African American Former Foster Youth with Faculty Members of African Descent in Higher Education

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Abstract

Upon emancipation from the foster care system at age 18, many African Americans are not prepared for college, but like many other non-traditional populations, these former foster youth aspire to attend college. For those entering college, in addition to facing the challenges of being former foster youth, African Americans may have to deal with stereotypes from both their peers as well as faculty members. This research will develop a conceptual model to explore whether having a faculty mentor of African descent has an effect on academic achievement for African American former foster youth.

Introduction

Previous research in the United States consistently highlights the negative outcomes for young adults who have been part of the foster care system. Some of the outcomes include: low educational attainment, high unemployment, homelessness, mental and physical health challenges, delinquency, and other risky behavior as compared to their non-foster youth peers (Ahrens et al. 2011; Day et al. 201; Dworsky et al. 2010; Greeson and Bowen 2008; Osterling and Hines 2006; Williams 2011; Zetlin and Shea 2010). While these youth experience such unfortunate conditions, it is important to highlight their positive aspirations including the desire to continue their education. Despite the fact that many emancipated foster youth nationwide want to pursue post-secondary education, only two percent attain a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Rassen, Cooper and Mery 2010). The generally poor educational outcomes found among this population are associated with numerous factors. Factors such as growing up in out-of-home care and transitioning to young adulthood influence educational outcomes. Some of these factors include maltreatment, inconsistent social support, and lack of access to educational assistance or college preparation classes and advising (Merdinger et al. 2005; Zetlin and Shea 2010). Dealing with the emotional trauma from the foster care system, not having consistent social support, and no access to college preparation classes may be putting many former foster youth behind their peers in being prepared for college.

The foster youth that enrolls in college may experience many financial and emotional barriers (Merdinger et al. 2005; Rassen, Cooper and Mery 2010; Unra 2011). Because of a lack of educational support and poor preparation for youth exiting the foster care system, colleges and universities are starting to view former foster youth as an underserved student population and are making efforts to reach out to the population. Campuses that lack support services are starting to design programs to provide financial, academic, and other support to students who have aged out of foster care (Day et al. 2011; Unra 2011). This is exemplified in programs like the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Sacramento. This program provides students with support through social events and tutoring. Most importantly, students who participate in this program are provided with mentoring to help with guidance through education, career, and personal development. Merdinger et al. (2005) have linked student success with the strength of their social support.

Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) suggest that college students benefit from interactions with faculty members. They argue that faculty members give students someone to look up to as well as offer emotional support during times of vulnerability. While these students are provided with mentors, African American students may have a hard time building a relationship with non-minority faculty members. These students are more apt to seek help from friends, family, or academic counselors who are minorities than from white faculty (Griffin and Tolldson 2012; Guiffrida 2005; Tatum 1997). Ogbu (1991) argues that the development of an oppositional identity by African American youth contributes to their low academic performance (cited in Kao and Thompson 2003, 434). Kao and Thompson (2003) further argue that this kind of oppositional identity starts in adolescence, during the time when most teenagers are going through stages of identity crisis. For African Americans, the identity focuses on their collective experience of discrimination; they define themselves in opposition to the dominant group (Kao and Thompson 2003). Feelings of anger and resentment are caused by their growing awareness of systematic exclusion of black people from participation in US society (Tatum 1997). With these feelings of anger and resentment, students begin to develop behaviors that are opposite from the dominant society. Certain styles of speech, dress, and music may be embraced as “authentically Black” and become highly valued, while behaviors associated with the dominant group are disregarded (Tatum 1997, 84). Having a culture that is unique from the dominant society can result in misunderstandings about such actions and behaviors. This can result in stereotyping of these African Americans and other minorities. Stereotypes against minorities in higher education continue to hinder their academic achievement. Stereotypes affect students’ academic
ability because it undermines their ability to be prosperous (Guiffrida 2005; Tatum 1997). Stereotypes such as the myth of inferiority can cause anxiety among students, eventually leading them to conform to the stereotype (Strayhorn and Terrell 2007). This author believes having a positive role model can stop this from happening.

African American students may seek help from other professionals of color in hopes of finding guidance and support in times of isolation. Providing African American students with mentors of African descent may promote cultural awareness and academic achievement (Griffin and Toldson 2012; Guiffrida 2005). Research suggests that it is important for African American students to be exposed and connected to African descendants who have been successful in higher education (Griffin and Toldson 2012; Guiffrida 2005). How will mentors of African descent influence the academic achievement of African American former foster youth?

Literature Review

The literature that connects African American college experiences and former foster youth college experience is limited, but separate research on each population exists (Conger and Marni 2003; Dworsky et al. 2012). Due to the paucity of research connecting the college experience of African Americans and former foster youth, this literature review identifies barriers that the intersecting group of former foster youth and African Americans experiences while in higher education. This author will use research provided by Conger and Marni (2003) to address issues of ethnicity within the foster care system, along with research from other authors. The literature highlights how the foster care system causes emotional trauma for youth, creates barriers to educational success, and the importance of mentoring for African American former foster youth as a way to counteract some of these barriers.

Life in the Foster Care system

On its own, entering into foster care increases the likelihood of developing a mental disorder (Timmer et al. 2006; Williams 2011; Zetlin and Shea 2010). The foster care system creates numerous emotional distresses that may have negative long-term consequences. In this system, African American children have a representation more than twice their amount in the nation (27% vs. 12.8 %) (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). Most foster youth experience an average of three out of home placements while in the foster care system, with these placements being in facilities such as non-relative family foster homes (47%), relative family foster homes (27%), institutions (9%), and group homes (6%) (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011; Merdinger et al. 2005). The combination of an uncertain foster care placement, maltreatment, and the possible parental abuse due to their parents’ limited parenting skills helps explain behavioral disruptions such as defiance and aggression among foster youth (Kaplan, Skolnik, and Turnbull 2009; Timmer et al. 2006; Williams 2011; Zetlin and Shea 2010). These behaviors are usually a reflection of the environment provided for them by their biological parents. The environments usually involve substance abuse, mental illness, a high degree of emotional dysfunction, and inconsistent child management skills (Timmer et al. 2006; Williams 2011). Constantly moving from location to location can cause anxiety and frustration for youth as they ponder where their next placement will be (Conger and Marni 2003; Timmer et al. 2006). Externalizing behaviors classified as aggressive, defiant, and angry may explain why many youth experience multiple placements. Youth who display these behaviors are troublesome to caregivers (Timmer et al. 2006). Some child welfare experts agree that foster parents who are trained in how to manage youth with behavioral difficulties may influence a reduced number of foster placements (Conger and Marni 2003). Taking foster parent classes may better prepare potential foster parents about what to expect before taking a foster youth into their home.

Barriers in High School

Having several placements might involve transferring to multiple schools. Lack of communication between the school systems and social workers is one barrier to success for these youth (Conger and Marni 2003; Zetlin and Shea 2010). Some caseworkers and foster youth providers do not inform school staff of a youth’s status, due to concerns of being stigmatized. They fear that their foster care status would result in youth being treated differently by their teachers and other school personnel (Conger and Marni 2003). Furthermore, many teachers and staff are unaware of the laws regarding the foster care system, and this affects how they serve students. Having an open line of communication between social workers and educators is critical for helping youth in foster care succeed in school (Day et al. 2011; Havalchak et al. 2009).

School transfers can be problematic, often requiring adjustment to new classes, curricula, and teachers, as well as missed or repeated lessons (Conger and Marni 2003; Day et al. 2011; Zetlin and Shea 2010). Constantly transferring to new schools causes students to suffer from circumstances they cannot control. In fact, switching schools is associated with low overall academic performance, classroom adjustments, and grades (Conger and Marni 2003). While the major consequence of having to transfer schools is low performance on standardized tests and grades, research points to additional consequences as well. Failure to transfer transcripts with other school records is an additional barrier for youth in high school. One study, which examined a random sample of case files for foster youth, found that transcripts and school records were not transferred in a timely manner (Havalchak et al. 2009). The failure to transfer transcripts may be one reason why many foster youth do not graduate from high school. Not transferring
transcripts in a timely manner can hinder a student’s chances of taking courses or participating in programs that will prepare them for college.

Lack of preparation for postsecondary education is yet another reason former foster youth who attend college fail to graduate (Day et al. 2011; Dworsky and Perez 2010; Zetlin and Shea 2010). Before enrolling in college, many of these youth are not prepared for the workload that is expected of them. In high school, former foster youth are less likely (15%) to take college prep courses than their non-foster care peers (32%; Havalchak et al. 2009). Taking college preparatory classes trains students for the workload they will experience in college. Data on postsecondary education for former foster youth are sparse and difficult to compare; estimates range widely for college enrollment rates: 7% to 48%; and college graduation rates: 1% to 11% (Havalchak et al. 2009). These low numbers in higher education suggest a lack of preparation for children in the foster care system. In the study conducted by Merdinger (2005), more than half of the participants reported that the foster care system did not prepare them well for college. Encouraging and guiding youth to take advantage of college preparatory courses in high school, assisting with scholarship applications, and providing transition services and college preparation programs are crucial to their educational successes (Dworsky and Perez 2010; Havalchak et al. 2009). Providing college preparation to youth while they are in the foster care system will prepare them for the course workload once they make it into college.

**Barriers in Higher Education**

It has been suggested that student service personnel at most post-secondary institutions are not familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of former foster youth (Day et al. 2011; Dworsky and Perez 2010; Rassen, Cooper, and Mery 2010). There may be a limited number of knowledgeable staff available to provide services. Many colleges’ efforts in relation to former foster youth are dependent on the commitment and efforts of the individual Foster Youth Liaison or a limited number of key staff (Rassen, Cooper, and Mery 2010). Colleges rely on specially trained staff members who are committed to serve the needs of former foster youth. If key staff members leave or change positions, assistance to students can be compromised (Rassen, Cooper, and Mery 2010). Staff members who are not aware of the services available to former foster youth hinder students from accessing services to support their educations. In a survey conducted by Rassen, Cooper, and Mery (2010), respondents indicated a top priority for outreach is to inform students about all the support services and staff available to them. Staying informed about all services and staff available may encourage more former foster youth to continue their educations.

Being emancipated from state care forces former foster youth to be independent financially, and find ways to fund their education. Most foster youth do not have anyone to co-sign a loan, and the lack of financial resources requires them to be in long hours of employment (Rassen, Cooper, and Mery 2010; Unra 2011). When former foster youth were asked in a survey about what specific resources are used at their college, most students indicated they used Financial Aid, Chafee grants, and Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) counseling (Rassen, Cooper and Mery 2010). Former foster youth who have exceeded the age limit are no longer able to receive funds, and must rely on employment to meet their financial obligations. According to Merdinger et al. (2005), most former foster youth work off campus, for an average of 26 hours weekly. Working long hours while taking a full course load (12 units) can limit the amount of time available to do homework. In a study conducted in the Midwest of former foster youth enrolled in college, the need to work was a common explanation for dropping out of school (Merdinger et al. 2005). As a solution to address this problem, it has been suggested that foster care alumni could be given priority in federally funded work-study programs (Day et al. 2011). Work-study programs tend to provide students with flexible hours, allowing them more time to study. Work is less likely to negatively affect their educational success because the number of hours a student can work is limited and work hours are more flexible (Day et al. 2011). With limitations on the number of hours to work and flexible work schedules, federal work-study programs allow former foster youths to focus on their education.

**Mentoring Foster Youth**

Youths who have emancipated themselves out of the foster care system have been identified as a vulnerable subpopulation from the child welfare system (Ahrens et al. 2011; Day et al. 2011; Dworsky et al. 2012; Greeson and Bowen 2008; Osterling and Hines 2006; Williams 2011; Zetlin and Shea 2010). To aid in the transition to independence, The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 states that Federal funds may be used to provide personal and emotional support to children aging out of foster care, through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults (Avery 2011). These funds also provide mentors. Having a mentor after aging out of the foster care system provides youth with strategies for independence. Mentoring programs can nurture connections that promote positive emotional outcomes in youths’ behavioral and academic functioning (Ahrens et al. 2011; Avery 2011; Greeson and Bowen 2008; Spencer 2007; Williams 2011). Having a mentor functions as a positive role model for youth to build resilience and this can continue into higher education. Having access to positive social support on campus such as faculty and community mentors seems to increase the likelihood that college students will persist until they graduate (Day et al. 2011).

While it is ideal for a mentoring relationship to promote emotional closeness and longevity, not all relationships are compatibly matched. A dysfunctional academic relationship can be defined as a relationship where one or both partners are suffering distress from being in the mentoring relationship (Spencer 2007). A
number of factors can contribute to a dysfunctional relationship including; time commitment, gender, race, or ethnicity. Formal mentoring for children of color is generally provided by white mentors, but the youths are more likely to identify their natural mentors as people who are similar in terms of race and or ethnicity (Spencer, 2007; Strayhorn and Terrell, 2007). While non-minority faculty members may have been educated about the experiences of African Americans, they are only able to have sympathy for the daily struggles of these students. On the other hand, faculty of African descent may be able to provide these students with proper guidance from their own experiences (Griffin and Toldson, 2012).

Faculty of African descent are able to create an emotional relationship that is unique from non-minority faculty members. Their common culture and experience with racism enables them to relate to students with genuineness, authenticity, and creativity in ways that white faculty members are not equipped to do (Griffin and Toldson, 2012; Guiffrida, 2005; Moore and Toliver, 2010; Strayhorn and Terrell, 2007). Black students experience multiple stressors at predominately white universities that cause them to dropout. Stressors within this population include racism, involvement in the criminal justice system, poverty, and over identification with special education services (Moore and Toliver, 2010). Dealing with these uncontrollable issues may leave students feeling helpless with no one to turn to. Hiring black faculty members to serve as mentors has been a retention strategy used by many predominately white colleges (Moore and Toliver, 2010). Research conducted by Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) found that African American students who were engaged with a faculty member of the same race were more satisfied with college. Having faculty members of African descent on campus is beneficial for the African American community, as well as adding diversity to predominantly White universities.

This is an exploratory research project, and a theoretical approach will be used. This author will develop a conceptual model to highlight how pairing African American faculty member mentors with foster youth of the same race may increase more educated youth.

**Same Race Mentoring Model**

**University Support Services**

Having programs that allow students to be around other students who share experiences similar to theirs, can help decrease social isolation (Dworsky and Perez, 2010; Rassen, Cooper and Mery, 2010; Unrau, 2011). Such programs allow students to make new friends, and develop healthy social habits among their peers and their friends. Examples of colleges that offer such a program for former foster youth include (but are not limited to): Western Michigan University, California State University Sacramento, and Seattle University. These schools provide social support and financial services to these unique students. Academic requirements within these programs keep students responsible for making academic progress. Some programs have a G.P.A. requirement of at least a 2.0 and require students to sign an agreement that outlines expectations towards academic progress (Dworsky and Perez, 2010). Tutoring services for help with homework assist this population towards academic achievement. Students have reported that getting assistance with choosing classes and finding the right major are their top priorities (Dworsky and Perez, 2010). Program directors work hard to make sure additional services are available to students. Students are provided with referrals for health, counseling, and community services (Dworsky and Perez, 2010).

Financial services are important for the advancement in education for this population. Financial services such as scholarships, book grants, and bus passes for students who have to commute to school (Dworsky and Perez, 2010; Rassen, Cooper, and Mery, 2010). Some schools offer additional financial services to students who are eligible. One such service is a competitive scholarship, this allows students to write about the reasons they are receiving funding and why it is important for their education. For example, California State University, Sacramento; California State University, East Bay; San Francisco State University; University of California, Irvine; and Western Michigan University have additional funds that cover remaining expenses for former foster youth after all other sources of financial aid have been exhausted (Dworsky and Perez, 2010; Unrau, 2011). These financial services allow students to focus more on school and less on rent, food, and books.

**Mentoring**

Youth who have been in the foster care system are at high risk for poor adult outcomes after emancipating from the foster care system. Some of these outcomes include: delinquency, homelessness, low educational attainment, poor mental health, poor physical health, unemployment, and other risky behavior compared to the general public (Ahrens et al., 2011; Day et al., 2011; Dworsky et al., 2012; Greer and Bowen, 2008; Osterling and Hines, 2006). To keep youth on the right track toward academic achievement, mentors may motivate students to stay in school. The presence of a positive, trusted, adult role model has been recognized as a protective factor against violence, drug and alcohol use, gang participation, and a poor attitude towards school (Avery, 2011; Osterling and Hines, 2006; Williams, 2011). Mentoring has also been shown to have emotional and developmental benefits for foster youth. Some of these benefits include better socio-emotional health, self-esteem, cognitive skills, and problem solving skills (Avery, 2011; Kaplan, Skolnik, and Turnbull, 2009; Osterling and Hines, 2006; Williams, 2011). Having these skills will assist with social development for youth interaction with other adults and peers.
Faculty Mentors of the Same Race

Foster youth experience many barriers within the foster care system that carry over into adulthood. Some of these barriers include lack of social support, lack of preparation for college, and the need to work to be self-sufficient. Dealing with these barriers has hindered many former foster youth from completing their educations (Dworsky and Perez 2010; Rassen, Cooper, and Mery 2010). In addition to dealing with obstacles coming out of the foster care system, African American former foster youths may have to deal with additional barriers in education such as racism and stereotypes. While in the foster care system, African American foster youths do not have the opportunity to develop a strong sense of racial identity, since finding a stable home is a priority (White et al. 2008). Research has shown that being provided with a faculty mentor of the same ethnic or racial background has been beneficial for the general population of African Americans in higher education (Griffin and Toldson 2012). Having a faculty mentor from the same racial background could be beneficial for African American former foster youth. Mentoring has been shown to be effective for at-risk populations, especially African Americans. Students sometimes do not realize their full potential, and mentoring draws out hidden talents from this group (Griffin and Toldson 2012). Having mentors of the same racial background may help change student perceptions about themselves and the community they come from. Having a mentor of the same race may serve as a buffer to this issue and increase self-confidence and persistence to continue their education.

Society continues to project stereotypes of African Americans as not being scholarly, and better suited for entertainment and athletics (Griffin and Toldson 2012; Tatum 1997). For those attending predominantly white institutions, they may have to deal with additional stereotypes within the educational system. Some of the stereotypes about men include being troubled, hopeless, and only attending school for financial aid or to “throw a ball around” (Tatum 1997, 84). Some of the stereotypes for African Americans include the women being welfare mothers, drug addicts, victims of domestic violence or A.I.D.S, and school dropouts (Tatum 1997). Some students find non-minority faculty members to be insensitive toward them (Tatum 1997). Some students find the non-black instructors to be unapproachable (Guiffrida 2005). Exposure to negative images about one’s group may have some students feeling as if school is not the place for them. Some students begin to internalize these stereotypes and start to fall behind in their studies (Harris 2012).

African American students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) have positive role models around them. Many of the students, faculty, and staff members at these institutions are of the same race, and students may not experience racial isolation (Gilbert et al. 2006; Guiffrida 2005; Harris 2012; Tatum 1997). With most of the population being of African descent, these students do not have to worry about racism toward them, and are provided with positive role models.

Tatum (1997) explains the importance of racial identity, and how it affects African Americans. Racial identity can be viewed as a person’s perception of sharing a common racial heritage with a particular racial group (Gilbert et al. 2006; Tatum 1997). When frustrated with racist situations, students turn to their friends for support. In some cases, non-minority friends are not prepared to offer support because they may not have experienced discrimination. Support is sometimes found among students in other organizations; in higher education settings, this is sometimes reflected in the presence of African American student groups. These include African American Greek-letter organizations, pre-professional clubs (such as health, business, and law), gospel choirs, and “theme floors,” or areas in dormitories that are designated living spaces for African American students. Often, these opportunities create a sense of belonging and purpose for students. African American students need a place to get together and discuss issues outside of class that are happening on their college campuses (Tatum 1997). Some universities do not offer this opportunity to their students.

African American students and professors at predominately white universities have fewer options for social interaction than their white counterparts. This experience has lead black students to seek black faculty for guidance, support, and understanding (Griffin 2012; Tatum 1997). In studies of African American students who have been mentored by same race faculty, levels of satisfaction are higher (Guiffrida 2005). African American faculty members tend to go beyond the call of duty to help students (Guiffrida 2005). One way this is done is by providing holistic advising sessions to their students. During an advising session, the student is not only provided with necessary classes for their major, but students also get to express opinions about topics outside of academia such as family, personal interests, and employment (Guiffrida 2005). Some faculty mentors also share their personal experiences in their profession.

Professors emphasize the importance of diversity in academia. African American faculty are more likely to incorporate black history into their curriculum and less likely to stereotype students based on their race (Guiffrida 2005). These faculty emphasize that higher education does not place a value on African Americans, but they must beat the barriers and do what they are supposed to do as students (Guiffrida 2005). Students are taught to value diversity, and to move beyond stereotypical ways of communicating with others. This is done through demonstrating mastery of their work and effective problem solving skills that can be utilized once they are immersed into dominant society (Guiffrida 2005; Moore and Toliver 2010). African American faculty have a positive outlook on the students’ capabilities and provide the students with more motivation than non-minority professors. Students are pushed harder to meet high expectations.
of showing their intelligence; and are expected to have consistent attendance, hand in quality work, participate, and think critically (Guiffrida 2005). This holds students accountable for their academic progress. Holding high expectations of the students changes the image of the black community.

Providing on campus university support is important to the success for former foster youth. Services such as filling out financial aid forms, applying for the Chafee grant, and tutoring services are a few of those services. In addition to these services, having a mentor is important to the mental health for these students. Being a college student requires students to multitask and be flexible with work, homework, and family. African American students have additional stressors that may hinder their educational success. Some of these stressors include racial isolation, stereotypes from the community, and professor who appear to be hostile (Guiffrida 2005). Mentors may provide students with an outlet to discuss their issues and a way to solve the problem. Having this comfort may alleviate some stress, and encourage students to continue their education.

Figure 1
Same Race Mentoring Model

Limitations

There are some identified limitations with this research, which include perceived personal bias from the author, and the inability to generalize to the population. It may be perceived that this author is personally biased about the topic because of her own experience with the foster care system. Although the author has had some personal experience within the foster care system, topics highlighted in this study do not necessarily reflect the author’s personal feelings or experience with the foster care system.

With this model is the inability to generalize about how mentoring with same race faculty members can be effective for all African American former foster youth. Some students may not feel comfortable with seeking help from faculty of the same race. As stated by one participant in a previous study, faculty members of African descent sometimes hold students to a standard that is too high for the student to reach (Guiffrida 2005). The student was required to do additional assignments and was often called on for participating in class, making it obvious to other students that she was different from them. Diversity training may provide insight for faculty members on how to work with African Americans. Youth who had positive experiences with the foster care system or positive contact with any non-minorities may not have a desire to be mentored by faculty of the same race. Some youth may have a natural skill of communicating with anyone despite their race or ethnicity.

Another limitation with this model was no inclusion of faculty members’ perspectives. Since faculty of color are also underrepresented in higher education, having access to mentors may be limited. In addition, the faculty members that are on campus may have a limited amount of time to mentor students.

A final limitation is the status of being a former foster youth. After aging out of the foster care system, some former foster youth are not aware that they qualify for foster care services. Youth who were in kinship care or an adopted family may not know they qualify for services. Since some students fear being stigmatized, they may refuse to identify as former foster youth and therefore not receive services offered by programs such as Guardian Scholars.

Research Implications

If research is able to support the author’s model, then maybe there are lessons that can be learned about mentoring foster youth after emancipating from the foster care system. While some research tends to highlight negative outcomes for former foster youth, the idea of providing intervention by a role model could be beneficial. Mentoring programs for African Americans in higher education have been shown to be successful. Since former foster youth have been identified as a vulnerable population, African American former foster youth may be at even
greater risk as they deal with the added issues of racism and stereotypes in higher education. Being provided with mentors from the same racial background might provide students with emotional support and techniques for enhancing success as students in the academy.

California has made efforts to provide former foster youth with additional services within higher education. Students are provided with housing support and an additional grant to assist with their early years in college. The Guardian Scholars Program provides resources for students to excel in their higher education experiences. Students are provided with information on developmental support, financial advising, and mentors.

**Future Research**

Future research should include participants who have experienced being part of the foster care system and are currently in higher education. Participants should include students who have mentors of the same race, and students who have mentors of other races. A quantitative method such as that of a survey, should be used in conjunction with the qualitative method of in-depth interviews.

**References**


