

Students on the Margins-Margins: A Critical Examination of Research on African American Foster Youth in Higher Education

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The purpose of this article is to convey the need for research that brings a human face to foster youth in higher education. It is important to understand their low educational outcomes as a social justice issue. It is important to emphasize the research on Black foster youth needs to value experiential knowledge (Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). Experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, and critical to understanding and analyzing racial subordination (Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). In the traditional critical race theory methodology, I use poetry and narratives to make meaning of this pervasive issue. Lastly, this paper offers several recommendations for research to humanize and celebrate Black foster children in the educational setting.

Keywords: Foster youth, African Americans, critical race theory

Former President Jimmy Carter was an advocate for foster youth. He understood that a community has a responsibility to take care of young men and women in foster care. He said, ...we have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care for their journey into adulthood. Our communities must commit themselves to a common goal of helping these young people to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures. (Carter, 2006, p. viii).

We have a moral responsibility to take care of these young people, however, when reading the educational statistics below, it is clear society has failed them. Pecora et al. (2006) report in their study, that approximately 65% of foster youth changed schools seven or more times from elementary through high school. Seventy-five percent of foster youth are working below grade level and more than half will have to repeat a grade at least one time before exiting the system (Sommer, Wu, & Mauldon, 2009). Additionally, up to 50% of foster youth will be placed into special education (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). Pecora et al. (2005) reported only 1% of foster youth obtain a college degree.

Unstable home environments, mental health issues, and poverty invariably create challenges within the classroom, which interfere with foster youth's ability to learn effectively (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Finkelstein, Miranda, & Wamsley, 2007; Merdinger et al., 2005; Noonan et al., 2012; Pecora et al., 2006). One study found that one third of foster youth are living at or below the poverty level, which is a rate three times that of the national poverty rate (Pecora et al., 2006). Foster youth live on the margins of society; in many ways Black foster youth are pushed to the "margins-margins." Black foster youth live in a space where their ethnicity leaves them vulnerable to racism and prejudice (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2013) and their classification as ward of the courts, stigmatizes them as a problem and not a person (Dowsky & Perez, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to convey the need for research that humanizes foster youth in higher education. Furthermore, I call for more research that offers a counter narrative to the dismal statistics presented above. This article hopes to center the need for research on Black (I use African American and Black interchangeably) foster youth as they do face a more difficult experience than their White peers in the entire K-12 to college continuum. The American Institutes for Research (2013) released a report that stated African-American children are twice as likely to have poor outcomes across child welfare and education systems. AIR (2013), continued to state that, "institutional racism and cultural biases underlie much of the disparity

that exists within these systems” (p. 7). It is important to understand the issue of educational outcomes of this population as a social justice one.

Brief Overview of Critical Race Theory

Reflecting on the barriers facing foster youth in K-12 and in higher education institutions, I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to give voice to a systematically oppressed group. While foster youth make up a small percentage of the college student populations, for many reasons they are more at-risk to dropout. I use CRT because it crosses disciplinary arenas. There are five core tenets that shape the basic assumptions, perspectives and research methods of CRT (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Tate, 1997). I offer a short explanation of each.

This first tenet understands the centrality of race and racism. CRT scholars recognize that racial identity and this form of oppression (racism) intersect with other subordinated identities and forms of oppression that influences lived experiences (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2005; Brayboy, 2005; Kumasi, 2011; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001); and I argue it intersects with youth who experienced the child welfare system. The second tenet is challenging the dominant ideology; CRT challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009).

The third tenet is that CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color is essential to understanding, and analyzing racial subordination. CRT scholars find experiential knowledge as strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by utilizing storytelling, family history, biographies, parables, cuentos, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996; Delgado, 1989). The fourth tenet is that CRT challenges ahistorical context and calls for an interdisciplinary perspective when analyzing race and racism. CRT in education challenges race neutrality (Delgado, 1984; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). The fifth tenet is that CRT is committed to social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty; and empowering oppressed minority groups (Matsuda, 1991).

Who are Foster Youth?

Foster youth are children who are taken away from their legal guardian (typically their birth parents) and placed in the child welfare system. Foster care was intended as a means to provide temporary out-of-home placement for children who were abused and/or neglected (Wolanin, 2005). The intention is to eventually reunite children back with their parents or extended relatives or pursue adoption. If foster youth are not released back to their families, they are forced to remain in care long term, until they emancipate at the age of 18 or 21 years old regardless of their level of preparation (Blome, 1997).

In 2013, there were an estimated 402,000 youth in foster care (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2013). Black/African Americans are overrepresented among the foster youth population. As of 2013, 24% of children in foster care were Black/African American, yet this racial/ethnic group only accounts for 13.3% of the U.S. population. In contrast, 42% of foster youth are White, yet Whites account for 77.7% of the U.S. population (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2013).

African American children are at a higher risk of being placed into foster care compared to any other race or ethnicity (Dettlaff et al., 2011; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Rivaux et al., 2008). Nationally, African Americans are over-represented in the entire continuum of the child welfare system (Agosti, 2011; Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010; Harris & Hackett, 2008; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Reed & Karpilow, 2002). Aside from just race, socio-economic status is also a determinant of whether or not youth are placed into foster care; Rivaux and colleagues (2008) found that

families from lower income households were at a higher risk for removal. However, when race was factored in for African American children, socio-economic status became a non-factor, as they were more likely to be removed regardless of being from high or low income households. This is a social justice issue, as African American children are systematically more likely to be tracked into a system that perpetuates inadequate life outcomes.

The Lack of Research of African American Foster Youth in Higher Education

Foster youth in higher education is an emergent area of study; Barth (1990) began this discussion of foster youth and life after emancipation. Barth's study reported that foster youth were not succeeding at every level of education. Since Barth's study, there has been further research on foster youth, especially in the area of social work and child welfare. Twenty years later, there is an interest in ethnic minority foster youth in higher education (Dworsky et al., 2010). However, more questions still need to be asked to understand how foster youth, and specifically African American foster youth, achieve degree attainment.

Dworsky et al. (2010) used a sample that was primarily African American in a study on racial and ethnic differences in the post-secondary outcomes of foster youth conducted. The study is cross-sectional and examined the outcomes of 659 young adults between the ages of 20 and 33 who were placed in foster care between 1988 and 1998 (Pecora et al., 2006). The study also looked at a sample of 732 young people from Iowa (n=63), Wisconsin (n=195), and Illinois (n=474) as they "age out" of foster care and transition to adulthood. The findings stated there was no significant difference in educational success among foster youth who identified as African American or White foster youth, yet their findings were inconsistent.

In another article, an examination of retention and graduation among foster youth in a four-year university, authored by Day, Dworsky, Fogarty and Damashek (2011), similar results were reported. Although this study did not directly look at African-American foster youth, the results varied and were too inconsistent to make inferences when taking into consideration race/ethnicity. This research is important and offers some data on African American foster youth who attend college. Nevertheless, post-positivist paradigms do not lend themselves to findings that a transformative paradigm (or constructivist paradigm) is able to obtain (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

A qualitative study by Perez and Romo (2011) investigated the experiences of Latino foster youth and their struggle to make it to college after emancipation. The findings were compelling; many of the youth in the study experienced a form of homelessness called "couch surfing." These individuals revealed *personal stories* about their struggle to stay off the streets (Perez & Romo, 2011). The findings indicated that family and extended relatives were very important to the Latino foster youth (Perez & Romo, 2011). This study illuminates how it is important to investigate the broken cultural and familial networks that can occur when there are numerous foster care placements (Perez & Romo, 2011). Not to say that Latino culture and African American culture are the same, but in the same way Perez and Romo investigated the experiences of Latino foster youth, it is important to understand the experiences of African American foster youth.

Above is a brief summation of recent literature on foster youth from diverse backgrounds. Each employed a post-positivist lens of research. The above research is valuable, however, CRT emphasizes a more nuanced approach that enables the population studied to give voice in an authentic way. Employing transformative research paradigms are central to understanding this unique population. It is important to give a voice and give a face to an almost invisible group of students to understand how African American foster youth persist through higher education. It is important to place African American foster youth narratives at the center of this research.

Solorzano and Yosso (2009) discuss how they used poetry and short story segments to tap into emotions and challenged themselves to look more deeply into the social sciences to find “pained yet triumphant voice of experience” (p. 140). They also discuss how they add their own experiences to the different concepts and ideas. In the following section, I draw upon the same tradition. I give a reflection of my own experience in foster care as a Black male.

Reflection from a Black Male Foster Youth

I spent my whole life in foster care. I can attest to the detrimental effects foster care had on me. Many times, I felt lost and unheard. It was not until I was placed in a foster home with someone who was Black that I began to feel comfortable. My foster mother offered me a home, school stability, and even more importantly a sense of family. With that said, I still had to endure a child welfare and educational system that I felt did not value me because I was Black. I remember in high school that a social worker was surprised when I told her I was going to college. I remember her telling me I should attend community college because as she put it, “someone with my background would not be able to handle the challenges of college.” What I experienced then was a microaggression on my ethnicity and my identity as a foster youth. She undermined my intelligence. These instances were all too common throughout my K-12 educational pursuits. The stigma of being a foster youth, along with the racial microaggressions of being a Black male, were experiences not easily escaped outside of my home. Instances like these become arduous and burdensome, which is often referred to by scholars as a form of racial battle fatigue (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011).

Dr. Jaiya John, a Black man who was formerly in foster care, pens in his 2008 book of poetry celebrating children separated from original family entitled *Beautiful*:

Let no child son be solo, in its singing join them in that breath of joy let them know their melody is a good one, they have music to offer the world. If they believe they are needed they will rise up like morning glories and stroke the sky. (p.62)

His words connect with me in a deep way; my ability to “rise up like morning glories and stroke the sky” was because of my foster mother who I affectionately call my grandmother. My grandmother and my mentors affirmed my identity as a foster youth and Black male. Each empowered me to express my masculinity in an authentic way. When I started college, I was able to enroll in a college support program for foster youth. The support program gave me language and an understanding of my identity that made me proud of who I am. I grew up in a system that dehumanized me yet the support program gave me a place to heal emotionally, and a positive avenue to express myself. I began to advocate for other foster youth and eventually that passion grew into a desire to pursue a PhD and write about the lived experiences of foster youth. In many ways, the program and the program coordinator were able to do what James and Lewis (2014) stated in their research on Black males;

Highlighting the intricacies of Blackmaleness reveals the distinctive cultural, social and emotional needs of Black male learners, and such insights can help redress hegemonic educational philosophies, practices and pedagogies that counter or ignore all together the unique development trajectories of Black males. (p.105)

The foster youth support program was a space that allowed me to step into Black manhood and not be afraid. The program coordinator was also Black and formerly in foster care. She understood my struggle, and she understood my pain.

There are many college support programs for foster youth, however, many of these programs go underutilized due to the hesitancy of foster youth to identify with services provided by the foster care system (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). Research has found the desire to not affiliate with the foster care system is due to the stigma associated with being a

foster youth (Dowsky & Perez, 2010; Wells & Zunz, 2009). There has been no research published that evaluates the extent to which these foster youth support programs have been a comfortable space for Black students to unpack their ethnic identity and understand the intersections of their racial/ethnic identity with their identity as a foster youth. Foster youth are not a homogeneous population, however, most research to date has presented foster youth as a group who experiences the child welfare and educational systems in the same manner. The limited research that has been conducted proves that they have very different experiences. My narrative and others also speak to this reality.

Implications and Conclusion

It is important to emphasize the research on foster youth needs to value experiential knowledge, (Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). Experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, and critical to understanding and analyzing racial subordination (Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). It is also important that research employs an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2010) as foster youth and specifically Black foster youth do succeed despite their challenges, (Lynch, 2011; Murray, 2013); in part because of their ability to be resilient (Hass, Quaylan, & Amoah, 2014; Murray, 2013). In conclusion, I offer four recommendations.

First, future research needs to bring forward the narratives of foster youth that offer nuanced perspectives that cross race, class, and gender in the educational setting. Second, research needs to dismantle the dominant, majorative narrative of foster care and call attention to the African American foster youth whose voices are being oppressed. Third, research needs to evaluate the college programs that support foster youth, to understand the experiences of their African American foster youth, and other foster youth of color. Fourth, educators and social workers committed to social justice must consistently challenge the ways that racial advancements are promoted through White supremacy and a color-blind ideology (Patton, McEwen, Rend'on & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). A critical race framework is necessary to illuminate how African American foster youth are marginalized throughout the entire K-12 to college pipeline.

When the inequities of being a person of color and a foster youth intersect, it interferes further with their education, and African American foster youth fare worse than Whites (Harris, et al., 2009). The importance of this paper illuminates the call for a more nuanced research agenda of foster youth in the higher education setting. Higher education institutions are failing foster youth, and failing to diversify their campuses by limiting access for foster youth. Research on foster youth has been race neutral, while foster youth suffer from many obstacles broadly. Whiteness is a privilege, a privilege that White foster youth benefit from too. Black foster youth experience foster care and the world very differently than their White peers. Audre Lorde (1986) stated, "it is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." To those with the reluctance to analyze this pervasive topic in a critical way, I offer the aforementioned quote, to encourage them to humanize, and celebrate African American foster youth in foster homes, and in the classroom.

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