Refusing To Settle for Less:

Narratives of Self-Authorship among Foster Care Youth in College

Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Mauriell H. Amechi, B.A.

Graduate Program in Education: Policy and Leadership

The Ohio State University
2013

Thesis Committee:
Terrell Strayhorn, Advisor
Tatiana Suspitsyna
Copyright by
Mauriell H. Amechi
2013
Abstract

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of four Black male collegians formerly in foster care (herein referred to as BMCFFC). More specifically, I assessed whether BMCFFC possess self-authored ways of knowing based on provocative pre-college and college experiences. Two central questions guided this investigation: (a) In what ways do BMCFFC develop self-authored ways of knowing? (b) How does self-authorship contribute to their success in higher education? Results from this study suggest that participants possessed self-authoring ways of knowing prior to college. Self-authorship emerged from provocative experiences related to the college decision-making process. The development of self-authorship enhanced the success of BMCFFC in terms of their self-efficacy and ability to cope effectively with and respond to difficult situations in college. For instance, participants often created systems of support in response to challenges in order to maintain their sense of self in college. Social support ranged from role models and mentors to engagement in campus activities and student organizations, as well as a degree of self-determination and resilience.
Dedication

To my late grandmother,

*Alzie Langston*

and all my friends, family, and faculty who supported me throughout the program.
Acknowledgements

To God. I would like to give thanks and praise to God for guiding me through this journey. I am grateful to Him for providing me with the focus, strength, patience, and intellect needed to craft this manuscript.

The Students Who Made This Study Possible. My deepest thanks and gratitude is given to the marvelous young men who dedicated their time in order to share their important life histories. It is my hope that your narratives will be of inspiration to current and future generations, as well as inspire local and national efforts to improve the educational and life outcomes of youth in foster care.

My Thesis Committee. Drs. Strayhorn and Suspitsyna, it goes without saying that the success of this project would not have been achieved without your support and direction. I thank you both for your honesty and meaningful feedback throughout the research process.

My family and friends. I would like to sincerely thank the family and friends who continually encouraged me and provided words of wisdom throughout this journey. I would like to extend a special recognition to the following individuals: My late grandmother Alzie Langston, my mother Jackie Langston, my sisters Jamela Butler and Devonya Langston, my brothers Ishva Minefee and Pierre Lucien, my dear friend Angeles Rodriguez, Dr. D’Andra Mull, Dr. Javaune Adams-Gaston, auntie Cyndi Freeman and Susan Gershenfeld.
Vita

June 2007……………………………………Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center

May 2011………………B.A. Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

May 2013…………………………………….M.A. Education, The Ohio State University

September 2011 to August 2012………………Graduate Enrichment Fellow,
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership,
The Ohio State University

September 2011 to August 2012…………Roy A. Koenigsknecht Graduate Alumni Fellow,
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership,
The Ohio State University

September 2012 to May 2013……………………Graduate Administrative Associate,
Moritz College of Law, The Ohio State University

Major Field: Education: Policy and Leadership

Area of Concentration: Higher Education and Student Affairs
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... iv

Vita ........................................................................................................................... v

Table of Contents .................................................................................................... vi

Chapter:

1: Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1

  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................... 5
  Research Questions ................................................................................................ 5
  Significance of the Study ....................................................................................... 5
  Delimitations .......................................................................................................... 7
  Organization of the Study ...................................................................................... 8

2: Literature Review ............................................................................................... 9

  Foster Youth ......................................................................................................... 9
  Challenges associated with out-of-home ............................................................. 10
  Demographic Characteristics of Children in Foster Care ............................... 11
  Foster Youth in Higher Education ..................................................................... 12
  Postsecondary Educational Experiences of Black Males .................................. 13
  Conceptual Framework ......................................................................................... 19

3: Methodology ..................................................................................................... 22

  Data Collection ................................................................................................... 25
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................................... 26
  Accuracy of Data and Trustworthiness ............................................................... 27
  Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 30
4: Findings..................................................................................................................31
  Staging of the Data.................................................................................................31
  Participant Profiles.................................................................................................31
  Single-Case Analysis Findings...............................................................................32
  Cross-Case Analysis Findings...............................................................................44
  Entering College as Self-Authored Knowers.......................................................44
  Self-Authored Way of Knowing Enhanced Coping Skills.....................................51

5: Discussion............................................................................................................55
  Relationship to Prior Research..............................................................................57
  Implications for Practice.........................................................................................60
  Implications for Research.......................................................................................62
  Implications for Policy............................................................................................63
  Limitations...............................................................................................................65

References..............................................................................................................69

Appendixes A: Interview Protocol.........................................................................73
Appendixes B: Recruitment Letter.........................................................................75
Appendixes C: Consent Form..................................................................................76
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

There’s no autonomy. There’s no autonomy and what happens is... if you have no autonomy and things go wrong you of course don’t go around blaming yourself if you’re not in control of the situation. You blame the system. You blame everything else around you. You transfer the fault. You can’t really...I think rightfully so you don’t really see... ‘what can I do different? What should I be doing?’ No, you look at it like ‘I can’t do anything to control this because I don’t have any power, I don’t have any control, and I don’t have any say. I don’t have power to do anything.’ And being in that situation it’s a dire situation because there is not going to be any active effort to try to make things better.

—Lamar, college student from foster care, age 21

Lamar’s sentiments underscore the multilayered emotional, social, psychological, and economic challenges facing many children and youth who have journeyed through the foster care system in the United States. Foster youth, by definition, have either been orphaned or have undergone two traumatic experiences: (1) parental neglect or abuse that resulted in notification of authorities such as child protective services and subsequently (2) removal from their family and placement in out-of-home care (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). In recent decades, a series of studies have investigated the social conditions of foster youth as well as those who have “aged-out” or been emancipated from the system (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Davis; Wolanin).

Undeniably, national statistics paint an alarming picture of foster youth not only in terms of their educational attainment and health outcomes but also in terms of their
unemployment and incarceration rates (Honoring Emancipated Youth, 2010). For instance, 75 percent of foster children lag behind their non-foster care peers by one grade level or more; 54 percent of foster youth who enter high school drop out before attaining their degree as compared with 84 percent of the general population; approximately 50-60 percent of children and youth served by foster care have moderate to severe mental health problems, as studies suggest that foster youth suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder at two times the rate of U.S. war veterans; high rates of unemployment have also become a distinctive trend among foster care alumni, as studies suggest that 50 percent become jobless at some point within five years of emancipation (Honoring Emancipated Youth). Given their plight from childhood to adulthood, it should come as no surprise, then, that approximately a quarter of young adults formerly in foster care are incarcerated within the first two years of emancipation.

The disconcerting state of foster youth in the U.S. has recently inspired federal interventions as well as a call to action among policymakers, the child welfare community, higher education professional organizations, colleges, and state higher education systems (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Many states have implemented policy initiatives with foster care children and youth in mind, ranging from system-wide support practices to financial aid incentives. For instance, following the introduction of the federal Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program, all states now receive financial resources to distribute vouchers that help fund college costs for students from
foster care backgrounds (Casey Family Programs). Secondly, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, enacted in 2008, now addresses the need for all colleges to provide foster care alumni with integrated support services. Furthermore, some institutions have responded by establishing innovative services tailored to the unique needs of undergraduates from foster care, including the designation of campus-based staff to coordinate academic services on behalf of these young people (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

Despite the various policy and program initiatives launched to thwart challenges facing foster youth locally and nationally, considerably less attention has been devoted to improving college access and retention among these young people (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Wolanin, 2005). In fact, still today, national statistics indicate that, while 70 percent of foster youth hope to attend college, fewer than five percent ever attain any postsecondary degree (Wolanin). Unquestionably, children and youth in foster care are among America’s most disadvantaged students in terms of opportunities for accessing and succeeding in higher education (Davis, 2006; Wolanin). Therefore, it may come as no surprise that many administrative and policy stakeholders in higher education institutions know little about the experience of their students who emerge from the foster care system (Davis, 2006; Wolanin). Indeed, there is a dearth of information about their college experiences.
Today, it is estimated that over 10.5 million children and youth comprise the foster care system in the U.S. on any given day (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Wolanin, 2005). From this number, over 150,000 foster youth have graduated from high school and are qualified for college. Yet, as evidenced by reports (Casey Family Programs; Wolanin), seldom do foster youth attain the lifelong personal, social, and economic benefits afforded by a successful postsecondary education. National college enrollment data illuminates an alarming disparity among foster youth, suggesting that only 20 percent matriculate into college, lagging significantly behind the national attendance rates of their peers (60 percent) (Wolanin). Moreover, with approximately 30,000 foster youth entering college each year, completion rates still remain disparately low—that is, 4 percent or less vs. 20 percent national rate.

Declining rates of educational attainment, not to mention major gaps in the literature, underscore the need for additional empirical evidence on foster youth in higher education. There is a compelling interest for more research on understanding how “at-risk” students, such as foster care alumni, navigate higher education with limited or no social support systems. Accordingly, this thesis study seeks to give voice to foster youth collegiate experiences as well as to expand knowledge and resources that may aid in their recruitment, success, and retention in college. Perhaps reversing the myth that foster youth undervalue higher education is the next step towards optimizing their social outcomes.
Purpose of the study

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of four Black male collegians formerly in foster care (herein referred to as BMCFFC). More specifically, I assessed whether BMCFFC possess self-authored ways of knowing based on provocative pre-college and college experiences. Furthermore, the questions were designed to delve into the meaning foster youth attach to their experiences. To holistically capture and understand how foster youth construct meaning of who they are and where they belong in society, I relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants. The use of qualitative methods generated a compilation of information-rich personal histories as well as major themes that provide insights on mechanisms by which to increase the success and retention of BMCFFC.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

(a) In what ways do BMCFFC develop self-authored ways of knowing?

(b) How does self-authorship contribute to their success in higher education?

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for several federal and institutional stakeholders. First, this study contributed to the literature on Black males collegians formerly in foster care
by providing insight into their lived experience in college. Previous research findings on foster youth focused almost exclusively on their K-12 educational experience. This study is significant because it delves into the meaning foster youth attach to their pre-college and college experiences, addressing a major knowledge gap among federal and institutional stakeholders. Ultimately this study departs from previous research on this population by providing an emic perspective from Black males from foster care, which was severely limited in prior studies.

Second, this study offers additional empirical evidence on the development of self-authorship among underserved college student populations. Previous research findings indicate that student populations from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to develop self-authoring ways of knowing in terms of accessing higher education (Pizzolato, 2003, 2004). Consistent with the self-authorship literature on high-risk student populations, findings from this investigation suggest that Black males formerly in foster care endure challenging circumstances prior to and during college that foster disequilibrium, which initiates their development toward self-authorship. As such, this study enhances our understanding of how self-authored ways of knowing manifest among foster care alumni in college.
Delimitations

This study, like all others, is limited in several respects. The first limitation concerns the sample size. For instance, this investigation relied on personal narratives data based on the experiences of four Black male collegians formerly in the foster care system. As such, this study does not assume that all foster youth share the same experiences or worldviews. Rather than generalize findings to all foster care alumni in college, the aim of this investigation was to capture the unique voices of the four foster care alumni selected exclusively for this study, and provide a holistic account or complex picture of their experiences in college (Creswell, 1997). Nonetheless, the use of a small number of individuals (usually one to three) is conducive to a “good” narrative study (Creswell).

Since this narrative inquiry aims to uncover the meaning foster care alumni make of their college experiences, qualitative methods were solely used. Consequently, maximizing the internal validity of participants’ responses ultimately presented some challenges, which is a second limitation of this study. However, self-reports are widely used in educational research (Pace, 1985). This method of data collection is generally considered valid if the following conditions are met: (1) the respondent is knowledgeable about the requested information, (2) the questions are phrased clearly, and (3) the respondent deems the question worthy of a response. To the extent that these conditions are true, my study’s findings and conclusions may be limited.
Organization of the Study

This study of the lived experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care is composed of the five chapters. Chapter One introduced the topic of the study, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the investigation, central research questions, and delimitations. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the lived experiences of youth in the foster care system, specifically those who emancipated or “aged-out” of care. Additionally, I include review of literature on the experiences of Black male collegians in higher education. I then elaborate on the conceptual framework that guides this study.

Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study, including the procedures utilized in the pilot study and individual interviews. Further, I provide detailed description of the sampling techniques employed, method of data collection and analysis, triangulation, and ethical procedures taken throughout the study. The next chapter will continue with a review of the literature on foster care alumni, the experiences of Black male collegians, and the conceptual framework of the study.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of the literature regarding the college experiences and development of youth formerly in foster care with a particular accent on the experiences of Black males. A careful review of the literature yielded several major themes: foster youth, challenges faced by foster youth, educational experiences of foster youth, Black males in higher education, and Black males’ challenges in college. Given the importance of students’ goals and commitments to their success in college, I drew upon self-authorship theory as a guide; this framework is discussed at the end of the chapter.

Foster Youth

Nationally, over 20,000 foster care youth age 16 and older “age out” or emancipate from the system each year (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Although the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood is a critical developmental shift for all youth, an ample number of studies suggest that emancipated foster youth are often ill prepared (Lemon, Hines & Merdinger, 2004). Faced with greater independence, limited resources, under-developed adult skills, and nearly no safety nets, youth exiting care are expected to function independently as young adults. Often traceable to maltreatment, foster youth are often at a high-risk for severe mental and emotional illnesses (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Moreover, studies show that the physical and psychological effects of
child maltreatment can continue into adolescence and adulthood. For instance, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found an array of mental health issues among adults formerly in foster care: posttraumatic stress disorder (25 percent), major depression (20 percent), social phobia (17 percent), panic syndrome (15 percent), and anxiety disorder (12 percent) (Wolanin, 2005).

**Challenges associated with out-of-home care experience**

All too often, youth in transition experience negative social outcomes. Studies suggest high levels of homelessness among emancipated foster youth (Honoring Emancipated Youth, 2010). For instance, while 60 percent of foster youth need immediate housing upon release, evidence suggests that 40-50 percent of foster youth become homeless within 18 months of emancipation (Honoring Emancipated Youth). Even those who are not homeless struggle to lead productive and stable lives after exiting care, as many confront a myriad of social barriers: unemployment, underemployment, substance abuse, and adult criminality among others (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Wolanin, 2005). Therefore, researchers investigating the experiences of foster youth in independent living programs (ILP) have noted mixed outcomes (Lemon, Hines & Merding, 2004; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Whereas multiple studies show that foster youth who received adequate skills training were more likely to transition well into ILP (e.g., budgeting, employment), other studies show that multiple re-entries in the system placed young adults at greater risk of an adverse discharge status (e.g.,
incarceration, homelessness, runaway) (Lemon, Hines & Merdinger). However, the aforementioned studies provide limited insight on the postsecondary educational experiences of emancipated foster youth.

Demographic Characteristics of Children in Foster Care

As a result of historical racial inequities in the U.S., children of color represent the majority of youth served in the child welfare system (Wolanin, 2005). In 2004, nearly 60 percent of all youth served by the foster care system were non-White, despite representing only 33 percent of the U.S. population (Davis, 2006). As evidenced by 2006 data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 35 percent of youth serviced by foster care are African American, yet this racial group comprises only 15 percent of the U.S. population.

Racial disparities in the child welfare system have resulted in traumatic experiences that place children of color at a greater disadvantage (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Wolanin, 2005; Davis, 2006). For instance, African American children were more likely than other subgroup to experience longer and more placements in foster care, and were less likely to receive adequate services (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Additionally, Black children were least likely to experience reunification or adoption. Lemon and Associate’s (2004) investigation corroborates previous studies by illustrating that ILP participants were more likely to be African American, Mexican American, or other Latino, and while in foster care, they tend to be placed in non-relative/out-of-home
placements. Moreover, studies demonstrate that racial discrimination and oppression also pose a significant threat to the psychosocial development of ethnic-minorities in foster care (Daining & DePanfilis). Thus, considerable evidence suggests that children from non-White backgrounds are at greater risk of developmental failure than their peers.

*Foster youth in higher education*

While access to higher education has improved significantly for some historically underrepresented groups, it very much remains out of reach for many children and youth served by foster care. Surveys indicate that at least 70 percent of foster youth have dreams of attending college; however, higher education institutions have been stagnant in addressing their unique needs as enrollment rates dwindle at 10 percent compared to national figures (65 percent) (Draeger, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). For those who gain access to higher education programs, significant barriers still permeate their lives as many endure personal adversity, financial hardships, and other obstacles that hinder their progression in college. Undoubtedly, national postsecondary degree completion rates reveal a major crisis among foster youth—only two percent complete a bachelor’s degree or higher. Nevertheless, relatively little knowledge exists on emancipated foster youth in college (Wolanin).

Only a few studies have explored factors that contribute to academic success among youth formerly in foster care. Using interview and survey data from 14 foster youth in college, Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) found that resiliency was uniquely
situated. Taken altogether, participants displayed an “internal locus of control” (Hines et al., p. 392). Although this study advances our knowledge of developmental outcomes among foster youth, the findings are extremely limited in explaining positive outcomes among Black males—a group that was nearly invisible in the sample. Furthermore, issues concerning the postsecondary educational experiences of foster youth have not been racialized in existing literature nor have they been explored specifically among Black male collegians that successfully transition to college. The present study aims to fill this gap. The section that follows will highlight the social challenges faced by men of color in higher education.

Postsecondary educational experiences of Black Males

In recent decades, a cadre of scholars investigating the unique experiences of Black college male students have called to question alarming disparities and existing inequities that thwart their progression and success in higher education (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2009a, Harper, 2009b; Strayhorn, 2009). In particular, a myriad of studies shed light on the precarious predicament of Black males in college and throughout educational pipeline. For example, higher education scholars and administrative stakeholders have characterized a significant portion of this group as an “endangered species” given their severely high attrition rates (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 6). Consequently, the declining educational attainment of Black men has resulted in unfavorable implications in terms of employment and social status.
As evidenced by data from Palmer and Young (2009), college participation rates have gradually risen among all racial/ethnic groups, yet Black men lag significantly behind their female counterparts in terms of their college enrollment, retention, and degree attainment (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). When the aforementioned statistics are closely examined across racial/ethnic groups, the gender gap among men in general and Black men in particular become even more pronounced. Given the critical condition of many Black males in higher education, it is important to review published research on academically underprepared and disengaged low performers.

Despite the proliferation of college access and the development of academic support programs that target at-risk student populations, Black male underrepresentation and attrition remains an endemic issue across many higher education institutions, including Minority-Serving Institutions (Cuyjet, 1997; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer & Young, 2009). Among those Black men who successfully matriculate into college, a disproportionately high number of them are faced with the reality of being academically underprepared for the rigors of college-level work. As evidenced by Cuyjet’s extensive review of the literature, academic deficiencies among Black male collegians have been linked to a number of conditions: poor K-12 schooling opportunities, financial hardships that hinder college access, lowered expectations among significant adults and peers toward academic achievement, limited access to suitable mentors and
role models, peer pressure to suppress academic talents and education as an outcome, and other barriers related to racism. Unfortunately, as he adds, these young men often enter higher education with “developmental disadvantages” that contribute to their dismal academic performance (p. 7).

Results from Cuyjet’s (1997) investigation offer additional empirical evidence on the current condition of Black men in higher education. Based on 6,765 Black student respondents to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Cuyjet found that Black men spent considerably less time studying and taking class-related notes, were less likely to engage in collaborative academic experiences, and devoted less time towards writing and revising papers compared to their female counterparts. He also found that Black men were less likely to participate in campus events and student organizations. Similar trends were noted within Harper’s (2009) chapter on Black male student disengagement. For example, whereas Black women capitalized on leadership roles and other purposeful engagement opportunities, Black men devoted much of their time being unproductive, working out in campus fitness centers, playing basketball, and pursuing romantic relationships with women.

Black male disengagement trends highlighted above corroborate findings from Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek’s 2004 study based on the National Survey of Student Engagement. Using a sample of 1,167 Black undergraduates at 12 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Harper et al. found that while men in this sample
reported greater interactions with faculty, they still lagged significantly behind their female counterparts in time spent towards studying, reading, and writing, as well as working diligently to meet the professor’s expectations. Unquestionably, the general perception even among Black male student leaders in Kimbrough and Harper’s (2006) qualitative study was that Black men are “grossly disengaged” (Harper, 2009, p. 143).

In an effort to make meaning of outcome disparities among Black men at HBCUs, participants in Kimbrough and Harper’s (2006) study presented several explanations (Harper, 2009). In addition to the belief that many Black men enter college devaluing campus engagement, Black male student leaders believe that these men regard sports, athleticism and physical activity as “cooler” and socially acceptable. Another perspective among Black male student leaders is that men generally encounter difficulty working together. Lastly, as others have echoed (Cuyjet, 1997), the continuing shortage of Black male role models and mentors is another explanation given as to why some Black men undervalue campus involvement.

Two studies, Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009) and Palmer and Young (2009), have addressed factors that promote achievement among academically underprepared Black men at HBCUs. Palmer et al.’s study explored the experiences of 11 Black male juniors and seniors who entered a public HBCU through its remedial program and persisted to graduation. Among the key findings from Palmer et al.’s study was that participants encountered financial barriers paying for college. As noted by the authors,
this finding did not appear unusual given the institutional context in which the study was situated. However, a more striking finding was that most Black men in this study described how pride interfered with their willingness to seek out campus support services. Furthermore, external issues in the homes and communities of Black male students often posed a constant threat to their success in college. In sum, findings here underscore significant impediments to Black male student achievement and engagement.

Palmer and Young’s (2009) qualitative investigation explored the academic experiences of 11 Black male upperclassmen that entered a public HBCU, initially underprepared, through its pre-college program. While most participants in this study perceived campus involvement and faculty interactions as conducive to their academic success and personal development, Black men frequently expressed dissatisfaction about their social exclusion on campus as a result of institutional negligence. As Bush and Bush (2010) posit, “the role of the institution must be taken into consideration by colleges that are attempting to improve student achievement (p. 57),” as opposed to solely addressing individual behaviors.

As research has consistently shown, perceptions of institutional support play a critical role in explaining academic attrition and disengagement among students in general and Black male students in particular (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). For instance, even after minority male students become academically integrated and savvy to the college setting particularly at predominantly
White institutions (PWIs), they often confront negative perceptions about their intellectual abilities, discrimination, racial stereotypes, and a hostile campus environment generally as part of their daily experience (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Cuyjet, 1997).

Furthermore, Black male collegians often struggle to develop effective coping strategies to fit in and succeed at PWIs, engendering what some scholars characterize as “cool pose,” or a “ritualized form of masculinity” that empowers Black males and gives them a sense of control (Bonner & Bailey, 2006, p. 34). Moreover, studies suggest that sense of belonging is important to Black male collegians not just in terms of a goal or desired end but also in terms of serving as a motive for academic and social behaviors (Strayhorn, 2009). Despite the considerable attention that has already been devoted to exploring Black males in the educational pipeline (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper 2009; Palmer & Maramba, 2011), institutional stakeholders in higher education still know little about the experience of Black male collegians from foster care backgrounds. Such findings reinforced the need to exclusively examine the experiences of Black men in the current study. Ultimately, in order to reverse this growing gender gap, institutions must first recognize the value of engaging, retaining, and graduating all Black male students, from academically underprepared and disengaged low performers to student-athletes, achievers and student leaders. The following section
will include a review of the constructs that informed the conceptual framework of this pilot study.

**Conceptual Framework**

Self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007) was chosen for theoretical sense making in this study. Formulated from Kegan’s (1994) ideas on self-evolution, Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship is based on a longitudinal qualitative study of college students and graduates, offering empirical evidence on their sense of meaning making and its connection to epistemological development. As asserted by Baxter Magolda, self-authorship is “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010, p. 183). Using a four-phase model—1) *following formulas*, 2) *crossroads*, 3) *becoming the author*, and 4) *internal foundation*—Baxter Magolda posits that an individual undergoes the journey toward self-authored ways of knowing wherein external influences become less significant compared to internal ones. Furthermore, this model consists of four dimensions: trusting yourself, confidence to direct your own life, acting on one’s environment effectively, and maintaining your own identity.

The theory, in part, assumes that young adults enter the first phase lacking an internal compass or self-defined plan for their future (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Evans et al., 2010). In effect, these individuals follow a path dictated by influential parents, teachers, peers, and college advisors among others.
Baxter Magolda found that young adults arrive at a point in which they become dissatisfied with their future plans or lack of success (Evans et al, 2010). In contrast to the first phase, individuals in the crossroads phase start acknowledging the need to consider their own perspective, feelings, and general welfare in relationships.

Parallel to Kegan’s fourth order of consciousness, an individual who progresses to the third phase, or self-authorship, has gained the ability to create his or her own path and beliefs based on conviction. During this period, intensive self-reflection is required in constructing a strong self-concept. Once an individual has found stability in his or her self-concept and in mutual relationships, they discover an internal foundation wherein life decisions are based on their own beliefs. In sum, as Baxter Magolda posits, “self authored persons have the developmental capacity for interdependence, or the ability to respect one’s own and others’ needs, negotiate multiple perspectives, and engage in genuinely mutual relationship” (p. 492).

Baxter Magolda’s framework was derived originally on a racially homogeneous population sample—White, Caucasian individuals (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Critics often call into question Baxter Magolda’s assertion that development toward self-authorship typically begins after college. For instance, in examining self-authorship development in “high-risk” students, Pizzolato (2004) found that these students entered college with “self-authoring ways of knowing intact” (p. 429), wherein many had already overcome adversity early in life that caused disequilibrium. Based on findings from a similar study
on high-risk students, Pizzolato (2003) concluded that development of self-authorship requires provocative experiences and willingness among students to cognitively engage in the self-authoring process. Unlike their higher privileged peers, high-risk students often encountered circumstances requiring them to create or author their own formulas for success.

Consistent with the self-authorship literature on high-risk student populations (Pizzolato, 2003; 2004), it is reasonable to assume that the pre-college socialization experiences of foster care alumni are fraught with circumstances that lead to disequilibrium; therefore, they will begin the journey towards self-authorship prior to college. As Pizzolato (2003) suggests, “in carving out college student possible selves, [underprivileged] students may need to develop strong internal foundations that keep them working toward their goals and protect them from suffering excessively from not fitting in with their peers or community at-large” p. 800). To the extent that is true, another aim of this study is to better understand how self-authoring ways of knowing develop among Black male collegians formerly in foster care. The next chapter will review the methodology of the study, specifically the procedures utilized in the pilot study, sampling techniques employed, method of data collection and analysis, triangulation, and ethical procedures taken throughout the study.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Consistent with the epistemological assumptions of constructivism is the narrative inquiry methodology employed in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 1986; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Narrative researchers seek to understand and reconstruct the lived experience of individuals and how they make sense or meaning of those experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Clandinin and Connelly posit:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between the researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up peoples’ lives both individual and social. (p. 20)

In essence, narrative inquiry involves the examination of experiences and stories lived and told.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) delineate four directions for inquiring into the narrative: inward and outward, backward, and forward. Inward refers to the internal conditions such as feelings, beliefs, values, and optimism, whereas outward describes the environment such as structures, conditions, and experiences. Backward and forward refers to temporality—that is, past, present, and future. In effect, a narrative researcher discovers an experience in these four ways and asks questions pointing in each direction.
Therefore, when narrative inquiry is employed as a methodology, the researcher is able to pose questions, collect field notes, formulate interpretations, and create a narrative of the experiences that speak to the social and personal dimensions, while simultaneously addressing temporal issues—issues in the present, past, and future. Collectively, these four dimensions capture the wholeness of one’s experience, including the meaning or sense making derived over time.

Narrative inquiry has allowed participants to express through narratives the meaning they attached to their college experiences in particular and lives in general. This approach also allowed for the exploration of self-authorship development among participants and any environmental conditions that promoted it. In addition, I selected this methodological approach because it reaffirms studying people in their natural setting and recognizes the importance of examining social phenomenon from the perspective of those who live it (Clandinin, 2007). In essence, this approach enabled me to “give voice” to a largely invisible group of students and to do so without “doing violence” to their authentic voice (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Overall, the underpinnings of the constructivist qualitative approach have congruent positioning with my own ethics and values as a researcher.

Given the explorative nature of this study, I chose qualitative research for two primary reasons. First, I sought to build a “complex, holistic picture” (Creswell, 1997) of an understudied population in higher education—African American males formerly in
foster care. As prescribed by Creswell, “qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Second, qualitative research afforded me an insider (emic) perspective, which facilitated and enhanced my ability to interpret “phenomena it terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 15). Although this emic perspective does not necessarily permit generalizability, it affords me the opportunity to provide a richer description of participant’s experiences (Creswell). Overall, this approach was helpful in not only addressing the central research questions but also in providing a “complex, holistic picture” of the population under study (p. 15).

Sample

Purposeful sampling techniques, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1986), were employed to ensure that all participants met the following criteria: (a) identify as “African American” or “Black” males (b) are enrolled or were recently (in the last three years) enrolled full-time at an institution of higher education, (c) are between the age of 18-27, and (d) identify as an emancipated foster care youth. Specifically, I worked with college administrators and personal contacts to identify and recruit an initial pool of three prospective participants—individuals who met the sampling criteria. For example, I forwarded recruitment letters to the directors of minority student affairs departments at two major research universities in the Midwest and one on the West coast. Snowballing sampling was also used to identify the fourth participant. Additionally, I distributed an
electronic copy of my recruitment letter to my professional social networks on Facebook
and Twitter, such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Standing
Committee on Men and Masculinities. Participants who received the recruitment letter for
the study contacted me via email. Willing participants were then interviewed one-on-one
either in-person or by phone. The data discussed in this study focuses exclusively on four
participants at four different public research universities. All participants selected
pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection for this study consisted of semi-structured,
in-depth interviews. The interviews lasted one-hour on average and were semi-structured
to ensure all participants were asked the same central questions, but flexibility was
allowed to ensure that participants identified and shared reflections in areas of importance
to them. In effect, the main segments of the interview are constructed “in situ”—as the
conversation unfolds (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 500). This method of asking
participants to describe important experiences “allows for multiple, context-bound
realities to emerge as the interviewer listens to each individual’s unique perspective” (p.
498). Although interviews were structured in context, primary questions probed into
participant’s foster care background and pre-college experiences, transition to and in-
college experiences, and observations and reflections on life.
The interview protocol consisted of seven semi-structured interview questions that explored the following topical areas: participants’ (1) background and pre-college experiences, (2) transition to and-in college, and (3) reflections/observations on life. Questions posed in this investigation range from “Tell me about your experience growing up” and “Can you tell me about a situation where you had to make a difficult decision in college? Tell me the story, how you handled the situation, and anything that influenced your decision.” to “What advice would you offer other foster youth who aspire to attend college?” The first question was designed to build rapport with participants. The interview examined students’ narratives of experiences in the foster care system, as well as their college transition.

Participants provided verbal consent to partake in 60-minute interviews in-person, via telephone, or video conference call. Prior to interviews, participants completed a demographic sheet (e.g., socioeconomic status, age), which was used to account for potential nuances among participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

**Data Analysis**

As part of my analytic process, I begin by carefully reading and rereading all “field texts” or narratives to identify relevant themes and trends (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). Next, I began to “restory” or reorganize participants’ narratives into a chronological framework. This process consisted of gathering narratives, analyzing
them for key elements (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the
narratives to place them in a sequence. In analyzing transcribed responses from
participants, I created a grand narrative that fit according to Clandinin and Connelly’s
(2000) three dimensional narrative inquiry space: the personal and social (the interaction),
the past, present, and future (continuity), and the place (situation). Finally, as part of the
analytic process, participants were also involved to authenticate the major themes
gathered from their narratives. Overall, the member checking technique enabled the
researcher to establish trustworthiness and congruence within the study (Jones, Torres &
Arminio, 2006).

Accuracy of Data and Trustworthiness

Throughout the research process, a number of techniques were employed to establish
trustworthiness and enhance the accuracy of the data. In the following section, I will
discuss issues regarding the credibility, transferability, and quality of this investigation.

Credibility. Credibility refers to whether a researcher’s judgment is reasonable
and consistent with insights shared by participants (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006).
Credibility was brought to this study through the process of member checking, peer
debriefing, and data triangulation (Creswell, 1997).

Member checking refers to when the researcher solicits feedback from
participants regarding the credibility of findings and interpretations (Creswell, 1997).
Guba and Lincoln (1989) posit that member checking is “the most crucial technique for
establishing credibility” (p. 314). Towards the end of the analytic process, I shared findings from this investigation with participants and asked them to authenticate my interpretations and provide feedback. Additionally, I consistently paraphrased participant responses during the interview and allocated time for clarification. Three (of four) participants responded to my request for feedback and confirmed my interpretations. In an effort to ensure confidentiality, one participant requested that I blind the educational institutions that he has attended. Overall, participants in this study expressed satisfaction with my analysis of their narratives.

Peer review or debriefing was another measure that I used to bring credibility to the study. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), peer debriefing is the “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind” (p. 308). One peer debriefer was used during the data collection and analysis phase of this study. At the time of this study, the peer debriefer was an unaffiliated undergraduate student who also provided support with data transcription. Throughout the analysis phase, the peer debriefer served as a sounding board, not only by supporting and challenging interpretations, but also by asking clarifying questions and sharing in-depth insights that I may have overlooked.

Finally, to maximize the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings, all interviews conducted were transcribed and audio-recorded interviews. This triangulation
technique permits researchers to make use of multiple sources of information in identifying a theme and perspective (Creswell, 1997). The inclusion of transcribed responses from participants not only enhanced the quality of my interpretations but also allowed me to provide a rich, thick description of narratives in their individual voices (Crewell). For instance, through the use of information-rich quotes, I sought to illuminate the lived experiences of participants and capture their unique and authentic voices.

**Transferability.** In qualitative research, transferability allows the reader to determine if the results are applicable to their unique environment (Creswell, 1997). In this investigation, thick, rich description of the narrative is used to achieve transferability. The use of thick, rich description offered insights on the time, place, and context of this study, which allows the readers to determine the context of the narrative and whether the results are then applicable to their own context or environment (Creswell). Additionally, the use of a semi-structured interview protocol provided the flexibility needed to probe into the narratives of participants and gather a broad amount of data for in-depth analysis.

**Quality.** To meet the criteria of goodness, researchers must “embody, discuss, and illustrate the elements of goodness in a language consistent with the philosophical grounding being used” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The goodness or quality of this qualitative investigation was enhanced by the congruency of the research design and the research problem (Creswell, 1997). A constructivist epistemology undergirded this study, which aligned with the process or development of self-authorship as well as the
environmental conditions that facilitate it. Consistent with the epistemological assumptions of constructivism is the narrative inquiry methodology employed as well (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodological approach reaffirms my beliefs that knowledge is found within an individual and how he or she made meaning of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly). In sum, these beliefs and assumptions are congruent with a constructivist worldview, which enhanced the quality of the investigation.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, the data collection and analysis techniques described above have a long tradition in qualitative research (Creswell, 1997). In my efforts to give voice to a largely invisible college student population, the employment of member checking, peer debriefing, detailed and thick descriptions, as well as transcribed and audio-recorded interviews not only enhanced the authenticity of findings presented in chapter four but also promoted trustworthiness and transferability (Creswell). Toward addressing the guiding research questions of the study, the data collection and analysis techniques described above allowed me to address potential misinterpretations and provide accurate accounts of participant narratives.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Staging the data

In this chapter, I present findings that were identified by analyzing interview data from Lamar, Khalio, Kevin, and Joseph. First, I present a brief introduction for each participant, which includes insights on their personal narrative in foster care, educational background, and life trajectory. Then, I present the results of the single-case analysis, followed by the cross-case themes.

Participant Profiles

Lamar. A product of the foster care system and the south side of Chicago, Lamar is a 21-year-old who was placed in foster care at age five. Prior to his transition into an independent living program, Lamar spent over a decade in the foster care system along with his older brother. Currently, he is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in sociology at liberal arts college in the South and has plans to pursue graduate studies in the near future.

Khalio. Khalio is a 27-year-old who was placed in the foster care system due his mother’s substance abuse problems and absent father. After undergoing multiple placements, Khalio and his older brother were eventually adopted by their aunt. After adoption, he attained a bachelor’s degree with magna cum laude distinction in political science from a research university on the East coast. At the time of interview, Khalio was pursuing of a Ph.D. in political science from a Midwestern research institution.
Kevin. Kevin was placed in the guardianship of his grandmother along with two other siblings after birth. Although his biological parents reappeared during his adolescent years, his grandmother maintained sole guardianship of Kevin and his siblings until she passed during his late adolescent years. From that point on, his aunt raised him. He thrived in high school and college; in fact, Kevin was a well-respected student leader among peers and staff at Crenshaw high school. He was 24 years old at the time of interview and had earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Joseph. Joseph entered the foster care system as an infant given his mother’s substance abuse problem. During the first years of his life, he experienced several placements in foster care before eventually being adopted and raised by his older sister. For Joseph, school has always been seen as a “safe haven” away from the external realities of foster care. At the time of interview (age 24), he was pursuing a master’s degree in public policy at Pepperdine University.

Single-Case Analysis Findings

Lamar. Major themes identified in Lamar’s narrative include expectations of failure, self-determination, social support from mentors and role models, and a sense of responsibility. Having spent most of his childhood and adolescent years in the foster care, my journey into Lamar’s narrative began with his recollection of being removed from his mother’s custody at the age of five. In fact, he recalled his early placement into foster
care as “a better fit environment in terms of stability...not having to worry about shelter, food, and things of that nature.” Over a span of thirteen years, Lamar endured multiple transitions within foster care. In addition to reporting instances of abuse while in foster care, Lamar expressed frustrations about the low expectations and deficit perceptions maintained by some stakeholders in foster care. In describing the culture within the foster care system, he recounted the following example:

They think [foster youth in care] are incapable of making their own decisions. They are incapable of making good choices. They think [foster youth] are incapable, not intelligent enough, to understand or comprehend what is happening in that courtroom. Or when you are 16, [you are perceived as] too young...too immature...lacking the wisdom to make decisions about your own life.

At the age of 16, he was afforded the opportunity to participate in an independent living program. Lamar’s placement in an independent living program ignited a newfound sense of self-determination and zeal for success. As he exclaimed, it was the “greatest experience” in foster care:

I was extremely ambitious once I was living on my own. I was definitely at a more advantageous position to take advantage of those resources relative to other people and this is something I observed and was told.

Through this experience, Lamar revealed the theme of social support from mentors and role models. He explained that the independent living program provided participants with a wide network of resources, which included guidance in pursuing college. When asked to recount his experience applying to college and learning about educational
opportunities in higher education, Lamar offered the following example:

I had the help of mentors who exposed me to the [college decision-making] process...something that I was definitely unaware of...it was new. Nobody in my family had graduated from college. Nobody in my family had gone. 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 these things were extremely new, very new. So having mentors there was key, very key...Coming to understand the ins-and-outs of college applications, scholarships, and things of that nature. Mentors were a catalyst to me crafting my own ambitions. Originally I wasn’t even thinking about college as an option because of the finances behind it. I soon learned that it was an option, a viable option, even for those who come from lower income backgrounds. So I learned that. That definitely upped my motivation to do well in school because I knew, how well I did in school, that college applications would be dependent on the track record I had in high school. This was something that I never really thought about previous to college becoming the goal. But once college became the goal it’s like okay ‘this is what needs to happen to make that happen.’

As illustrated in the narrative above, Lamar’s access to a network of mentors not only enhanced his understanding of the college decision-making process but also allowed him to see higher education as a viable opportunity. Because no one in his family had the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education, Lamar felt a greater sense of responsibility, self-determination, and zeal to take advantage of the resources and support systems at his disposal. Consider the following example:

Nobody in my family ever even had the opportunity to go to college. We aren’t even talking a lack of their own ambition they never had the opportunity but most of these things were mostly inaccessible to them and so strictly making that connection that I am unique. That I am actually in a position to do something that none of these people have had the opportunity to do which is go to college and get an education a higher
education.

Lamar’s awareness and recognition that college was accessible to him was instrumental in his self-determination and drive for pursuing college. As Lamar nears the end of his undergraduate program, he remains focused and determined to become the first college graduate in his family. Ultimately, Lamar encourages youth in foster care to be confident in themselves, stay informed about important decisions made on their behalf, and to take some degree of ownership over their futures.

**Kevin.** My journey into the narrative of Kevin unveiled themes of a crime-invested neighborhood, extracurricular involvement, self-determination, social support from mentors and family, and a sense of responsibility. When asked to describe his experience growing up, Kevin recounted a story about how his grandmother adopted him along with his older brother in a crime and gang-infested Los Angeles neighborhood. Despite his grandmother’s efforts to steer them away from deviant behavior, Kevin’s older brother eventually became a “big-time gang banger.” With limited access to role models in his community and family, Kevin began to view his educational experiences in school as a haven or “second home.” When asked to share insights on his childhood academic experiences, Kevin shared the following example:

I felt like school was my second home. I didn’t want to be at home for multiple reasons. I got involved purposely so I could do after school activities. I got involved with student government, which I thought was great. It was a way for me to get involved with everything but my outlet I don’t have to be home until like 6 o’clock because we have programs,
activities.

Kevin went on to talk about the network of mentors, college advisors, and family members who were supportive of his college endeavors. For instance, he shared that his grandmother and aunt were unfamiliar with the college application process, yet very encouraging and supportive. Along with supportive family members, Kevin gave credit to college counselors and admission representatives who saw potential in him. Consider the following example:

I had a great college counselor who she saw potential in me and I was in the kid that and I still think I am the guy that I don’t see all the potential that everyone sees in me. And so she saw potential in me and she had to beg me to apply to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), and even the admission reps, they were kind of your...they weren’t your typical admission reps. They are the folks that their sitting job is to recruit minorities students so they put more care, more mentoring, and more support behind it.

Given his access to a strong support system, Kevin gradually began to see higher education as a viable opportunity. With his college aspirations in mind, Kevin became proactive in applying for scholarship opportunities that most of his peers took for granted. When asked about his motivations for pursuing college, Kevin illustrated not only self-determination but also a sense of responsibility to his family and community. Consider the next example:

I guess I figured out my wonderful high school was a mess and that we should do something to change it. And so college and education was apparently the way to make change happen. You couldn’t do much with a high school diploma and so going to college was a motivation to: One, get
out of the hood and do something different and, two, hopefully return to the hood and do something to make a change. I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to come back to Crimshaw and actually teach and be the principal and be like Joe Clark a little bit on Crimshaw High. In order to do that I had to go to college and get a teaching degree. Do something for my school, do something for my family in the long run and those are my real motivations.

Unquestionably, Kevin’s vision of becoming a future educational leader and teacher at his high school was also influential to his college pursuits. As an alumnus of the University of California, Los Angeles, Kevin encourages former foster youth who are interested in pursuing a higher education to overcome their fears of being marginalized, develop a strong support system, and to take advantage of all the opportunities that a successful college education has to offer.

Joseph. My journey into Joseph’s narrative revealed themes of abuse, extracurricular involvement, supportive network of mentors and family, and self-determination. As a result of his mother’s drug addiction, Joseph was immediately placed into foster care following birth. Although Joseph was reunited with his biological parents after one year, he painted the picture of a disruptive household where his mother and father continued their history of abuse. When asked to share insights on his experience growing up, Joseph shared the following story:

Both my parents were drug abusers. My mother was a prostitute as well so she would be out on the streets, out and about of prison. My father would leave for days...leaving me and my older brother to fend for ourselves, and then take care of our younger sibling while he was out selling drugs. Just imagine, we are 13-year-old kids, we have six or five year old younger
siblings to take care of.

Consequently, Joseph and his young siblings would endure multiple placements in foster care before their eldest sister took them into custody. The abusive and traumatic experiences described above left Joseph in search of refuge. Another central theme in Joseph’s narrative was his identification of school as a “haven.” When asked to expound on his early educational experiences, Joseph described himself as a “smart kid” who always enjoyed being in school:

Seeing your father yelling and hitting us and all types of things at home...leaving that place for a number of hours gave me a sense of peace at least environmentally. It was a place I could receive some of the attention I was seeking, some of the validation sometimes.

Joseph’s extracurricular involvement and academic drive continued throughout elementary and high school. With support and encouragement from mentors, teachers, and his eldest sister, Joseph went on to share how he developed a greater sense of self-efficacy and self-concept. In the next example, Joseph described how he “blossomed” in high school:

My leadership skills came out. During this time I was involved in church and I had mentor and that faith community helped as well...give me a greater sense of purpose...give me a greater sense of identity founded in Judeo-Christian principles. And so I had a mentor, a father figure who could and would invest his time, and his knowledge, and his wisdom in me. And I think that gave me the confidence to seek for greater things and believe that I could do better.

Through this example, Joseph shed light on the theme of self-determination, as he strived
to overcome past abuses and create a brighter and rewarding meaningful future for himself. In describing his greatest motivations for pursuing a higher education, Joseph explained that attending college would allow him to not only “escape” traumatic childhood experiences but also allow him to do the “right thing.” Consider the next example:

I chose to attend college because number one to escape abuse. (Laughs) And because it was the right thing to do...it was the right thing for me to do. I did not fully understand the implications of going to college whether it was the culture shock I would face or this or that. It was that college was the right thing to do.

Hard work, self-determination and a desire to do the “right thing” would ultimately pay off in a meaningful way for Joseph. In fact, as he described, graduating from high school and being admitted to a university on scholarship was one of his greatest successes in life. As he progresses in his academic and intellectual pursuits at Pepperdine University, he encourages foster youth to not allow their past to hunt their future, and if they desire to pursue a higher education, Joseph stressed the importance of being proactive in creating a system of support to cope with (un)foreseen challenges.

**Khalio.** Familial conflict, extracurricular and leadership involvement, self-determination, and a sense of responsibility were among the major themes that characterized Khalio’s narrative. In recounting his childhood experience, Khalio highlighted multiple transitions within the foster care, which were driven by his mother’s drug addiction and the absence of his father. After being placed in the home of a
Portuguese family, Khalio and his younger sibling were eventually taken into custody by their aunt. This transition resulted in familial conflict as he described in the next example:

I have a cousin who is two year older and he was very territorial. He is an only child. He was not very welcoming of my brother and I. I think there was resentment from all parties. I think my aunt resented the fact that she had two new children in the house. I think my cousin resented the fact he knew had to share his mother and his space with two new people. So it was very very tense growing up. He and I did not get along very well. My aunt and I did not get along very well...I remember her saying she would send us back. I remember quite a few times where she would say she would send us back.

Given the tense environment at home, Khalio searched for ways to release his suppressed pain and frustrations, as well as a way to make meaning of his situation in foster care.

The theme of extra-curricular involvement emerged, as he increasingly developed the reputation of being a high-achieving student leader within his elementary school.

Consider the next example:

I think I have had a lot of peaks and valleys. When I was younger I remember being very angry, I remember wondering why I didn’t have a father and why my mother was in the situation she was in. I was actually quite a bit of a bully, first and second grade. I remember distinctly in he 7th grade when I made Student of the Week or Student of the Month. Our school had a tracking program and it was based on colors. So red was below average, green was average, excuse me, yellow was below average, red was average, green was above average, and blue was the high-achieving students. I remember as a result of that being bumped up to the blue group. I was in the green. I remember being accepted into the Excel program, which is the middle school version of Upward Bound. That kind of set me off in a very different trajectory, different than I have had. I had decided that year that summer by doing the Excel program that I would run for Student Council President, 8TH grade year. I did [run for Student Council President] and I won. And I really think that changed everything.
Khalio’s early achievement in elementary school changed his outlook on life for the better. In fact, as he described, being elected Student Council President was a “breakout moment” and indicator that he did not have to accept the status quo or settle for less.

Khalio provided the following example:

It was the first time that I realized that I can do something different from what everyone else was doing. And I was able to set myself apart. I think I had by that time decided that I did not want to be apart of the environment that I grew up in. That I wanted to do something different and I think that accolade kind of opened a door. One it was a flag to other people that I was capable and people started taking interest and encouraging me in that direction. By the time I had won student council, which seems so trivial these days but it really put me on a pedestal of sorts. I was this African American boy now the leader of the school. So that meant a lot and people started to look up to me. And because I had that kind of audience, I performed in a way that demonstrated integrity and I think a lot of people respected me for it. So kind of breaking this stereotypical black male if you will. That was my moment. That was my breakout moment.

Khalio’s academic drive, extracurricular involvement, and leadership continued throughout elementary and high school. Among other notable accomplishments, Khalio successfully ran for Student Class President throughout high school, winning all four years. As he asserted:

I started to make fundamentally different decisions; some people call me a contrarian. I think there was some truth to that. I was making decisions that went against what everyone else was doing or every black male I knew was doing. I didn’t play sports. I was never very athletic. But I could be a good public speaker. I was able to organize people and get things done. And I took interest in different things.

Khalio’s hard work, self-determination, and leadership in school were instrumental to his
development of a positive outlook on life, as well as his desire for a higher education. In recounting his greatest motivations for a higher education, Khalio shared the following:

I knew it was the only way I would break a cycle. I knew that was the only way, well not the only way I don’t want to say that. I knew that...again my point of view was to do something different. I remember at the time I was looking at the Marine Corps as well. I was applying to colleges and looking at the Marine Corps. I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t know how I was going to pay for it but I knew I had to leave. And if I didn’t I would be stuck and again going back to 7TH and 8TH grade I knew that I needed something different I wanted something different and college or the Corps would provide me with that avenue.

Motivated by the fact that no one in his family had attained a college education, Khalio demonstrated a high degree of self-efficacy and independence in seeking knowledge about the college decision-making process. For instance, Khalio recounted how he spent a lot of time in his high school’s college resource center learning about the college application process, such as how to complete a federal application for student financial aid (FAFSA), as well as participating in college visitations and college enrichment programs (e.g., Upward Bound). After transitioning to college, Khalio remained an active leader on campus, serving as a resident assistant throughout college. Consider the next example:

I was living in an all-male dormitory my freshman year and I decided to be a resident assistant the next year, so all males mostly black. And I got that position and I decided to stay in that position until I graduated. So it kind of afforded me the opportunity to...in a way to play big brother and help develop other young black males. I don’t know if it was every deliberate but I think it was a subconscious decision. I wanted to be a part of developing young black males. I could not do it with my family and I
could not do it with my little brother and it became my life mission.
Through this example above, Khalio demonstrated a sense of responsibility in serving the developmental needs of peers as an undergraduate. Moreover, by becoming a mentor and role model for these young men, Khalio sought to reconcile the resentment he felt about attending college out-of-state and leaving behind his younger brother. Nonetheless, Khalio continues to be a trailblazer and role model for young men of color, in pursuit of a doctor of philosophy in political science at a prominent research university. In closing, Khalio encourages youth in foster care to never limit themselves to self-imposed barriers, “think outside the box,” and to become the “personal architect” over their lives and future.

This narrative study explored ways in which Black male collegians formerly in foster care (herein referred to as BMCFFC) develop self-authored ways of knowing. Results from this study illustrate that all four participants possessed self-authoring ways of knowing prior to college. Self-authorship emerged from provocative experiences related to the college decision-making process. The development of self-authorship enhanced the success of BMCFFC in terms of their self-efficacy and ability to cope effectively with and respond to difficult situations in college. For example, participants often created systems of support in response to challenges in order to maintain their sense of self in college. Social
support ranged from role models and mentors to engagement in campus activities and student organizations, as well as a degree of self-determination and resilience.

Cross-Case Analysis Findings

Entering College as Self-Authored Knowers

The development of self-authorship among participants in the study was preceded by a number of provocative experiences. Provocative experiences are defined as developmental crises that challenged students’ current ways of knowing and conceptions of self, resulting in optimal levels of disequilibrium (Pizzolato, 2003). Experiences were also coded as provocative if they provoked moderate levels of dissonance. BMCFFC experienced at least one crossroads in their development of self-authorship. This was best illustrated in Lamar’s comments about navigating the foster care system with limited control over his destiny. For instance, he shared:

There’s no autonomy. There’s no autonomy and what happens is… if you have no autonomy and things go wrong you of course don’t go around blaming yourself if you’re not in control of the situation. You blame the system. You blame everything else around you. You transfer the fault. You can’t really…I think rightfully so you don’t really see…‘what can I do different? What should I be doing?’ No, you look at it like ‘I can’t do anything to control this because I don’t have any power, I don’t have any control, and I don’t have any say. I don’t have power to do anything.’ And being in that situation it’s a dire situation because there is not going to be any active effort to try to make things better.
Lamar’s story clarifies how dissatisfaction arose among former foster youth at the crossroads when they experienced moderate levels of disequilibrium from following external formulas.

Navigating the foster care system also proved to be a challenge for BMCFFC given the approach often employed by some stakeholders in foster care. To succeed in reaching college, as Lamar asserts, one must cultivate his or her own internal voice and ignore comments about deficits:

There are so many resources [in place], and for various reasons. One [example] being outright bias from people who are making the decisions on behalf of foster youth. They think [foster youth in care] are incapable of making their own decisions. They are incapable of making good choices. They think [foster youth] are incapable, not intelligent enough, to understand or comprehend what is happening in that courtroom. Or when you are 16, [you are perceived as] too young…too immature…lacking the wisdom to make decisions about your own life. You have to be confident enough in yourself to say ‘no I am intelligent enough to make this decision, I am wise enough, and I am ready.’ Being 16, or whatever age, if there is nobody else 100% invested in your future, your outcomes…if there is nobody 100% looking out for your interest…you have to do it! And that will literally be the only way you will make it…the only way.

Participants described how their experiences in school became the one area of their life where they had some control over the outcome. In other words, as Joseph and Kevin assert, school became a protective factor or “haven” from the realities of their family and community. Joseph shared the following:

I think recalling that school was also a haven. It was a get away. It was an opportunity to get away for a while. And that’s how I ate (laughs)…That’s how we ate…a bunch of things. I would just say that dealing with all the
issues at home…seeing my father yelling and hitting us and all types of things at home leaving that a place for a number of hours gave me a sense of peace at least environmentally. It was a place I could receive some of the attention I was seeking.

While Joseph explained how school served as a haven from dysfunctional behaviors associated with family life, Kevin described school as an outlet for directing one’s energies. Consider the following point:

School was my outlet where I could just be away from my dysfunctional household. So [in] high school I spent a lot of hours just at school, afterschool tutoring. I didn’t need the tutoring but I just went. Got involved because home was not a happy, great place.

In response to the realities of the foster care system, BMCFFC in this study began to critically assess the importance of constructing their own ideas, beliefs, and identity in social relations to achieve their college student goals. For instance, Lamar reflected on the limited educational outcomes among his family members:

It was simple really. All I had to do is look at my life and the things that transpired and make the connections between education and the opportunities that the people in my family had to do the things they wanted in life…such as provide for their family. It was a very simple logical connection: My mother didn’t graduate high school, my brother didn’t graduate, my father only had a high school education, my uncle didn’t graduate from high school, my auntie [sic] didn’t graduate from high school. And so I made the connection to their life outcomes and the opportunities they had.

Whereas Lamar’s inspiration for college was deeply rooted in the fact that no one in his family previously had the opportunity to pursue a higher education, Kevin explained how his high school and neighborhood served as a source of inspiration in addition to family.
When asked why he decided to attend college, Kevin responded:

I guess I figured out my wonderful high school was a mess and that we should do something to change it. And so college and education was apparently the way to make change happen. You couldn’t do much with a high school diploma and so going to college was a motivation to: One, get out of the hood and do something different and, two, hopefully return to the hood and do something to make a change. I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to come back to Crimshaw and actually teach and be the principal and be like Joe Clark a little bit on Crimshaw High. In order to do that I had to go to college and get a teaching degree. Do something for my school, do something for my family in the long run and those are my real motivations.

As evidenced from the stories above, Joseph, Lamar and Kevin’s processing of provocative experiences in the foster care system reflect the initial shift from passively accepting external formulas for success to critically assessing them in relationship to an internal belief system. After multiple placements in foster care, which resulted in physical, verbal, and psychological abuse, BMCFFC in this study were compelled to define their own path in life. For example, Lamar was able to develop an internal voice and foundation after entering an independent living program at the age of 16. In addition to receiving his own apartment, the independent living program provided him with a range of social support, resources, and guidance. Ultimately, this unique opportunity afforded Lamar the autonomy to finally bring his internally defined goals into fruition:

Understanding that now being in an environment where I am in control of my destiny…of course with boundaries but largely able to do what I need to do with my life. Control my own finances, control my own time, and control of my own behavior all that factored in, I’m basically in control of my whole life. And so being able to do that is why it was the best thing
that had 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 my…all the outcomes there was no…there was no…from that point forth there was no ability to finger point or transfer blame to anyone in terms of what happened in my life. And so, with that, it was definitely an opportunity to either flourish or diminish and for me it was *flourish*.

Lamar’s placement in the independent living program afforded him a higher level of independence, which fostered trust in his internal voice. In fact, BMCFFC in this study spoke of situations where they stop accepting formulas from external authorities and begin to develop their own. Consider the next example from Lamar:

> From that time, from [the age of] 16-18, big things happened. A lot of big things happened, a lot of progress occurred because: (A) I was in that environment where I could be independent; (B) I have the resources around me to really put things in place. It wasn’t just me having all these goals but it was ‘okay the resources to really put these goals into reality and into fruition and; (C) it was an environment where my condition could be fostered rather than diminished.

Lamar’s narrative is reflective of the general developmental shift towards self-authorship found in the stories of all the participants. As participants’ self-authoring ways of knowing evolved, they spoke of various mentors, advisors, and even college recruiters who affirmed their aspirations—to enter college after emancipating from foster care. For instance, Lamar articulated well the process that it takes to develop and then act upon internal foundations:

> I had the help of mentors who exposed me to the [college decision-making] process...something that I was definitely unaware of…it was new. Nobody in my family had graduated from college. Nobody in my family had gone. 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 these things were extremely new, very new. So having mentors there was key, very key...Coming to understand the ins-and-outs of college applications, scholarships, and things of that nature. Mentors were a catalyst to me crafting my own ambitions. Originally I wasn’t even thinking about college as an option because of the finances behind it. I soon learned that it was an option, a viable option, even for those who come from lower income backgrounds. So I learned that. That definitely upped my motivation to do well in school because I knew, how well I did in school, that college applications would be dependent on the track record I had in high school. This was something that I never really thought about previous to college becoming the goal. But once college became the goal it’s like okay ‘this is what needs to happen to make that happen.’

While Lamar benefited from the support and guidance of mentors in applying to college, Khalio demonstrated the capacity to act upon his internal foundation and voice in seeking resources about the college decision-making process. When asked to discuss his process in applying to college, Khalio responded:

I spent a lot of time in our college resource room in high school. I really had no idea what I was looking for thinking back on it I really had no good sense. I knew that I had to apply to Y [University], which was the states’ flagship school and I had kind of randomly picked other programs. I remember deciding I wanted to leave [the state] so I started to look at programs elsewhere. I had no idea of 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. I knew I would figure it out.

Khalio described some of his early efforts to navigate the college decision-making process. Despite having limited support and direction from family, Khalio demonstrated a high degree of self-authorship by independently traveling out-of-state to visit several college campuses:
I had a car at that time. I remember taking a trip to Delaware to see the University of Delaware. I had randomly come across a minority recruitment thing they were doing and I signed up for it and I ended up going. One of my classmates went with her parents and I guess this is a funny story. They were driving in their car and I was driving in my car by myself so I went solo. I was just going to follow them to Delaware and then I was going to go to D.C. by myself and visit schools there...So I went to the University of Delaware, visited there and then I traveled to D.C. and visited American University and George Washington University. This was nothing arranged this was just me in the city looking around asking questions.

BMCFFC in this study not only demonstrated self-authorship in arranging college visits and tours but also in applying for scholarships and financial aid. For example, Kevin shared insight on their process in applying for scholarships that would remove a major financial barrier to their college aspirations:

I also had financial aid of course and I had an EFC [expected family contribution] of zero. I was so embarrassed when I found out like ‘I can’t for college or what is going to happen.’ But grants and scholarships came in...I was really just on my scholarship hustle. A lot of students at Crimshaw didn’t really take advantage of that scholarship notebook. I received two scholarships from one organization because they only had $500 scholarships and so I applied for one and no one applied for the other one so they gave me both of them because I was the only person to apply. So I came up really nicely in terms of little scholarships and a couple big scholarships...So I was loan free all my college life.

Despite emerging from underprivileged backgrounds where no one in their family attended college, BMCFFC demonstrated how they actively engaged the self-authoring process in high school by seeking information about various colleges and universities,
researching and applying for scholarships and financial aid, and even arranging college visitations.

*Self-Authored Way of Knowing Enhanced Coping Skills*

Upon entry to college, BMCFFC demonstrated the ability to act in self-authoring ways. Nevertheless, participants still encountered provocative experiences that created dissonance. Although the level of disequilibrium experienced by each participant varied, provocative experiences during college compelled them to reevaluate and revise their goals in relation to their internal foundation and self-identity. As illustrated in the stories of Lamar, Kevin, and Khalio, development toward higher degrees of self-authorship often requires external support. For example, Kevin described some of the academic difficulties he experienced transitioning to college:

My first quarter, we were on the quarter system at UCLA so there’s a fall, winter, spring, and summer quarter. My first fall quarter is was just definitely downhill. I just flunked almost everything. I had a D, C-, and an F all in one [quarter]. It was just like really rough to like...oh my God ‘I’m a 4.0 high school student I can’t be getting these kinds of grades.’ I never had an F a day of my life. It was of course the initial adjustment to college. I guess I didn’t feel confident after that. I was like ‘oh I’m stupid, what am I doing, I am a kid from the hood going to this prestigious school. I’m not going to make it. I think I should drop out.’

Contrary to his achievements in high school, Kevin’s poor academic performance during his first college term created dissonance, which called into question his college possible
self. Indeed, he quickly realized that the external realities of college required new skills or formulas for academic success. As he later explained, the establishment of positive, supportive and meaningful relationships with faculty and peers, coupled with tutoring support, were crucial factors in maintaining his sense of self in college:

That winter quarter I saw improvement because I figured it out: ‘All right I need to get tutoring...I need help.’ I started asking questions. I really just tapped into all the resources available that I didn’t take advantage of...Tutoring in my mind...you really need help if you need tutoring. But I didn’t realize that tutoring is how you get through college and how you make sense of all this stuff and how you make study buddies out of this tutoring group and things like that. I had study buddies, started going to office hours and really taking [advantage of opportunities at my disposal]. I started utilizing office hours and just talking to my professor, like ‘oh this how you get to know me since there is 300 people in this class huh?’...I had to get over my ego of asking for help...I struggled with that.

Whereas Kevin was driven to develop new goals for maintaining his sense of self in college, Lamar was forced to make a difficult decision that would ultimately alter his educational trajectory. Consider the following statement shared by Lamar:

I recently was in an early medical school program where they basically guarantee you a seat into a certain medical school. And I turned that down. The reason I turned that down is because of the responsibility that came if I would have accept it. I would have to do x, y and z during my senior year of college in order to remain in the program and I felt that locking myself into that I would also be locking myself out of a plethora of other opportunities that could come about if I would had stayed. I made the decision to turn it down. I would characterize it as a process of rational thinking, pros and cons, and also just how I felt about it in my heart. I just didn’t feel like it was the right time to do it, big decision.

Lamar’s sense of certainty stems from trusting his internal voice and foundation. Similar
to Lamar’s story, Khalio shared insights on a difficult decision he made in college, which required him to use his internal foundation. For instance, Khalio expressed concerns about the possibility of transferring to another university after his first semester:

I guess on a personal note my first semester I was not happy at X [University]. It seemed like I had went to a good school but the same people existed in that school. The same people from the neighborhood if you will. It did not seem to be very intellectually stimulating. I ended up in the business school. And I guess I never realized that when I was applying, I applied to the business school. My brother was younger and he was starting to act out and I was feeling that I needed to be there to help him and to help my Aunt with him. So I was debating if I should transfer back to Y [University]. And that was a difficult decision. On one hand, I wanted to have my own lived experience and the same time I wanted to be there for my brother. I had to do it for me...I would be of no use to him or anyone had I gone back.

In the absence of external formulas for success, Khalio’s final decision to remain at the same institution was influenced by his own internal belief system. As illustrated in the stories of Kevin, Lamar, and Khalio, BMCFFC were compelled to reevaluate and revise their formulas for success independently or through the support of mentors, advisors, and other external authority figures. Ultimately, students’ self-authorship development enhanced their ability to effectively cope with and respond to difficult situations in college.

Conclusion

As evidenced from their individual and collective narratives, BMCFFC in this study developed the capacity for self-authorship prior to college as they encountered an
array of provocative experiences that called to question their identity, beliefs, values, and social relations. The development of a support system enhanced their psychosocial development, especially their ability to cope with and respond to difficult situations in college. While the realities of foster care often proved to challenging and dispiriting at times, participants in this study demonstrated a high degree of self-determination, self-efficacy, and resilience. Ultimately, Lamar, Khalio, Kevin, and Joseph refused to settle for less.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to understand ways in which BMCFFC develop self-authored ways of knowing. Self-authorship was conceptualized as “shifting the source of one’s beliefs, identities, and social relations from the external world to the internal voice and foundation” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 282). My findings confirm and add new dimensions to existing research on self-authorship among racially and culturally diverse collegians (Pizzolato, 2003; 2004). As narratives from participants indicate, self-authorship emerged from provocative experiences related to the college decision-making process. Participants emerged from a range of backgrounds and varied in terms of their foster care placements. Although participants experienced multiple placements in out-of-home care, legal guardianship was often bestowed to an extended family member (e.g., grandmother, older sibling, aunt, and uncle).

Given the external realities of foster care, participants in this study were exposed to an array of traumatic experiences including, but not limited to physical, verbal, and psychological abuse. Participants also emerged from underprivileged backgrounds wherein college attendance was not the norm. For instance, participants articulated how some key stakeholders in foster care maintain lowered expectations and socio-cultural deficits about their future. Consequently, participants were often unsettled by their social
conditions in foster care and strongly desired to dictate their own path in life. Through their resourcefulness, BMCFFC developed formulas for financing their college education, developing personal statements, participating in college visits and tours, and connecting with college recruiters at various institutions. As one participant stated, “I had no idea of 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. I knew I would figure it out.” The absence of easily accessible formulas for pursuing higher education, coupled with multiple provocative experiences, compelled BMCFFC to develop their own formulas for pursuing college.

Findings from this study illustrate that self-authorship development requires a willingness to cognitively engage the self-authoring process (Pizzolato, 2003). This assertion is consistent with Pizzolato’s findings on self-authorship development among high-risk college students. Additionally, this willingness to engage the self-authoring process may reflect what Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) described as resilience or having a locus of control. As evidenced from participant narratives, self-authorship development occurs in the context of multiple events coupled with support from trusted mentors and advisors. With the combined support of mentors and advisors, participants developed internal foundations as they garnered trust in their voice. Overall, findings here suggest that self-authorship emerged from provocative experiences related to the college decision-making process.
This study also investigated how self-authorship contributed to their success in higher education. As evidenced from the narratives of BMCFFC, some participants experienced significant challenges adapting to the academic and socio-cultural norms of their respective college campuses, which resulted in disequilibrium as well. Nevertheless, their self-authored ways of knowing enhanced their self-efficacy and ability to cope effectively with and respond to difficult situations in college. For example, participants created systems of support in response to challenges in order to maintain their sense of self in college. Findings here are significant for several reasons. First, they demonstrate how the processing of provocative experiences in foster care affects self-authorship development in students’ attainment of their aspirations post-emancipation, which may not always equate to college. As a few participants noted, military enlistment was also seen as a viable option. Secondly, as reverberated in prior research (Pizzolato, 2003; 2004), my findings suggest that youth from underprivileged backgrounds possess the meaning-making capacity for self-authorship before college. This finding, in particular, expands our knowledge and understanding of experiences that cultivate self-authorship development. Ultimately, my findings suggest that self-authored ways of knowing combined with external systems of support (e.g., trusted advisors and mentors) contributed to the persistence and retention of BMCFFC.

Relationship of the Findings to Prior Research

By investigating the nature of provocative experiences in the context of the
American child welfare system, this study expands on Baxter Magolda’s (2008) findings that self-authorship develops through student processing of experiences. In the present study, provocative experiences began with individual encounters, though self-authorship developed after participants found external sources of support, which facilitated achievement of their internal goals. For instance, participants described instances where their foster parents could no longer provide procedural support in their college application and decision process. Despite lacking the formulas for pursuing college, BMCFFC willingly sought out guidance and resources when necessary. In fact, some participants successfully developed meaningful mentoring relationships with high school counselors, college recruiters, and members within their church. The aforementioned mentors provided encouragement and guidance in moments of uncertainty or cognitive dissonance. As Lamar states, “I had the help of mentors who exposed me to the [college decision-making] process...something that I was definitely unaware of...it was new.” Lamar, like other participants in this study, showed initial signs of self-authorship as a result his mentoring relationship. These findings expand on Baxter Magolda’s (2008) assertion that self-authorship develops through student processing of experiences.

This investigation also found that BMCFFC emerged from disadvantaged backgrounds, which led them to critically assess the importance of constructing their own voice and internal foundations to meet their college student goals. In other words, participants began to define their own formulas for success prior to college. As first-
generation college students, participants in this study not only found the college decision-making process difficult but also experienced difficulties navigating the campus environment. Although these findings challenge Baxter Magolda’s (2008) assertion that college students were less likely to develop self-authored ways of knowing, they support Pizzolato (2004) findings that “high risk” students matriculate to college with an internal voice.

Findings from this study offer additional empirical evidence on the evolution of self-authorship among college students. In this present study, BMCFFC’s showed signs of self-authorship prior to, during, and after college. However, the extent of each participant’s development toward self-authorship varied based on his circumstances. Despite entering college with an internal voice, participants encountered initial challenges assimilating to the norms of their respective college campuses. As such, participants reevaluated and revised their goals in relationship to their internal belief system. This finding is consistent with Baxter Magolda (2008) and Pizzolato’s (2003; 2004) conclusions regarding the progression of self-authorship. Result from their investigations showed that self-authorship occurred as a cyclical process.

The narratives of BMCFFC suggest that self-authorship is a non-linear process. Each participant shared stories about navigating the college decision-making process, yet their path towards achieving this goal was unique. For instance, whereas some individuals benefited substantially from mentoring relationships others were able to
navigate the college decision-making process with limited external support. Overall, the findings here corroborate Baxter Magolda (2008) ideological perspective that self-authorship is more complex and nuanced than a direct linear path.

BMCFFC demonstrated confidence, independence and resilience in not only navigating the college decision-making process but also in their ability to accept help and persist towards their goals. Thus, this investigation reinforces Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt’s (2005) assertion that foster care alumni who successfully transition to college possess resilience or an internal locus of control. Hines et al.’s investigation also identified “assertiveness, independence, persistence, and the ability to accept help” as some of the traits contributing to the success of foster youth in college (p. 391). Moreover, this finding extends Baxter Magolda’s belief that self-authorship “enhances, rather than constrains, relationships” (p. 282). Overall, these findings have significant implications for future research, policy, and practice.

**Implications for Practice**

Several implications for practice can be derived from this study. As illustrated by national statistics, attaining a postsecondary education has yet to become a norm for youth existing the American child welfare system (Davis, 2006; Casey Family Programs, 2010). The stories of Black male collegians formerly in foster care suggest that information about how to navigate the college decision-making process, such as applying for financial aid and scholarships, writing effective personal statements, or selecting the
best college or university, remains out of reach. Moreover, this subgroup often struggles to persist in college given their unfamiliarity with the college environment as first-generation students. With that said, it is vitally important that student affairs educators and key stakeholders for foster care work together to close this existing knowledge gap that perpetuates barriers to college access and retention.

One implication for future practice is the creation of professional development workshops and partnerships between high school counselors, college recruiters, admission staff, social workers and policymakers. Educating the key stakeholders about the lived experiences of foster care can help dispel deficit notions, negative stereotypes and low expectations. For example, these stakeholders can use Casey Family Program’s (2010) *Supporting success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Foster Youth—A framework for program enhancement* as a guide for establishing a structured curriculum for youth in foster care. Additionally, high school counselors, college recruiters, student affairs professionals, and policymakers can help ensure the success of these students by providing strategies for pursuing a postsecondary education, such as insights on the economic benefits of a college education, support in taking standardized tests, assistance with the college application and financial aid processes, access to college visitations, as well as a summer enrichment program to support their college transition (Davis, 2006).

As illuminated by the restories, the development of mentoring relationships not only enhanced their self-esteem and perception of self but also closed significant
knowledge gaps that thwarted their goals for pursuing college. Accordingly, a third implication for practice is the creation of targeted mentoring programs at postsecondary institutions to support the academic and psychosocial development of former foster youth who often emerge from first-generation backgrounds. As evidenced from the narratives of BMCFFC, the development of self-authorship as incoming students enhanced their ability and willingness to create systems of support in order to overcome challenges and maintain their college status.

Towards improving the educational outcomes of former foster youth in higher education and broader societal contexts, it is critical that student affairs educators and policy stakeholders incorporate the voice and perspectives of foster youth in the creation of college access and retention efforts. The narratives of former foster youth can provide significant insights into the evolving nature of their plight as well as provide meaningful formulas for success from outliers who transcend deficits, negative stereotypes, and low expectations.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study explored ways in which BMCFFC develop self-authored ways of knowing. Unlike previous studies on the experience of youth formerly in foster care, I employed narrative inquiry to illuminate their lived experiences and explore how they make sense or meaning of their conditions. To extend this line of inquiry, future research might explore the same questions but employ a longitudinal and mix method approach.
For example, another scholar might explore the experiences of foster youth during high school, after they begin the college decision-making process, and during their transition to college. This approach might enhance our understanding of their richly textured life histories and provide new insights on their development towards self-authored ways of knowing.

Incorporating the life stories of former foster youth who are unsuccessful in meeting their college goals might also extend the current study. As we know from empirical evidence and narratives uncovered in this study, 70 percent of foster youth have dreams of attending college, yet college entry rates remain disparately low at 10 percent (Draeger, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). Hence, the combination of life stories from foster care alumni who (un)succesfully access higher education will provide key stakeholders in foster care and postsecondary educational leaders with a richer understanding of how to improve their college entry in particular and life outcomes in general. Nevertheless, one can consider this investigation the first of many to come on this important population.

Implications for Future Policy

Several implications for future policy can be derived. In recent decades, a number of federal, local and state agencies have launched efforts to improve the disconcerting state of foster youth in the U.S. (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Despite these initiatives, it is imperative that administrative stakeholders at postsecondary institutions reevaluate and reform admission policies that hinder the access for foster care alumni. While college
admission staffs are charged with providing a holistic review of each college applicant, they often fall short of this tenet when it comes to youth in transition from foster care. Similarly, student affairs professionals commit to the vision of creating the extraordinary student experience, yet it remains unfulfilled for students formerly in foster care. As we know from the narratives shared in this study, coupled with empirical evidence, significant barriers continue to permeate the lives of youth transitioning from foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Draeger, 2007; Wolanin).

Towards improving their visibility in higher education, administrative and policy stakeholders should provide applicants with the option to self-disclose their status as a foster care alumni. As admission decisions are made, it is essential that admission staff not only consider their status as foster care alumni but more importantly the nuanced experiences that they can contribute to the college student body. This information should then be forwarded to financial aid officers who play a vital role in making sure that foster care alumni have the resources to attend college. As previous studies have shown, foster care alumni face major financial hardships and experience difficulties accessing certain forms of aid in which they qualify for, partly because financial aid officers are unaware of this status (Draeger, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). Furthermore, foster care alumni in college often need housing support during college breaks, which many postsecondary institutions fail to consider. Accordingly, it is imperative that administrative stakeholders in higher
education develop new policies and practices to enhance visibility among foster care alumni in college to ensure the direction of specialized services.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is not without limitations. First, this study relied on the use of cross-sectional data, which departs from the longitudinal approach taken in previous studies (Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2003). Consequently, it may be difficult to ascertain correlations between provocative experiences noted by participants and cyclical outcomes such as self-authorship development. For instance, with the exception of one individual, all of my participants completed their undergraduate education and were currently in graduate school or the workforce.

While the constructivist narrative inquiry research method of this study provided an emic perspective of the population under study, I recognize that the findings are not necessarily generalizable to all foster care alumni in college. Since this study was based on the analysis of in-depth, qualitative data, it lends itself to biases held by participants (Creswell, 1997). To minimize interviewee bias, interviews were conducted in a private office location and rapport-building techniques were used to create a safe space. In situations where interviews were facilitated via a Skype call, participants were instructed to find a location where they had the most privacy and convenience in discussing sensitive and personal experience. Additional steps were taken to ensure confidentiality in the study: (1) participants provided an alias on the demographic sheet completed prior
to the interview; (2) findings were not shared individuals outside of the study; (3) and interview transcripts, recordings, demographic sheets and other sensitive documents were stored in a secured office location.

A third limitation of this study is its lack of attention on the role of campus racial climate issues in the narratives of some participants. Given the scope of this study, I chose not to explore this issue in depth; nonetheless, some participants shared personal encounters about racial bias and cultural insensitivity at predominantly White institutions, which warrants the need for future investigations. To the extent that these conditions are true, my study’s findings and conclusions may be limited.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, a fourth limitation was the potential influence of the researcher’s perspective on the analysis of participant narratives. As such, triangulation strategies were utilized to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings: (1) transcribed and audio-recorded interviews, (2) member checking during the data analysis phase, and (3) peer debriefing to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations and conclusions. In sum, the analytical methods highlighted above improved my ability to co-create accurate restories.

This narrative study investigated ways in which BMCFFC develop self-authored ways of knowing. The restories reveal new dimensions and confirm existing research on self-authorship among racially and culturally diverse collegians (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2003; 2004). Narratives from participants illustrate that self-authorship
emerged from provocative experiences related to the college decision-making process. Provocative experiences prior to and during college led BMCFFC to critically assess the importance of constructing their own ideas, beliefs, and identity in social relations to achieve their college student goals. The development of self-authorship enhanced the ability of BMCFFC to create systems of support (i.e. trusted mentors, participation in student organizations, and self-motivation and resilience) and individually cope with difficult situations in college. In sum, findings here contribute to the growing literature on the evolution of self-authorship and the life experiences and outcomes of youth formerly in foster care.

Whereas previous research on foster youth focused almost exclusively on their K-12 educational experience, this study is significant because it sheds light on the lived experiences of BMCFFC. More importantly, the restories of participants delve into the meaning foster care alumni attach to their pre-college and college experiences, which offers additional empirical evidence on the development of self-authorship among racially and culturally diverse college student populations (Pizzolato, 2003, 2004). Lastly this study departs from previous research on foster youth by providing an emic perspective from Black males, which was severely limited in prior studies (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger, Hines, & Wyatt, 2001).

The implications from this study suggest the need for key stakeholders in foster care, student affairs educators, and policymakers to address significant knowledge gaps
that thwart the college aspirations of youth exiting from foster care. In addition to these efforts, college admissions departments should consider reforming policies that hinder college entry. The creation of professional development workshops and partnerships between the aforementioned stakeholders can help eliminate unintended barriers and dispel deficits, low expectations, and negative stereotypes. Furthermore, it is imperative that administrative stakeholders in higher education develop new policies and practices to enhance visibility among foster care alumni in college to ensure the direction of specialized services.

For youth exiting foster care and entering young adulthood, the ability to deconstruct one’s current social conditions (an epistemological capacity), and formulate a desired future (an intrapersonal capacity) with the combined support of advisors and mentors (an interpersonal capacity) is important in terms of reversing deficit educational and social outcomes. The critical narratives shared by Lamar, Kevin, Khalio, and Joseph gives voice to a largely invisible and underserved population in higher education. To date, three of these young men have successfully completed their bachelor’s degree, and the last individual is finishing his degree. In closing, the stories shared by participants offer a counter-narrative to dominant discourses on Black male collegians and emancipated foster youth who refuse to settle for less.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Refusing To Settle for Less:

Narratives of Self-Authorship among Foster Care Youth in College

Date: ____________________
Name: ____________________
Fictitious name/pseudonym: ____________________
Current institution: ____________________
Academic rank: ____________________
Academic major(s): ____________________
Parent’s highest level of education: ____________________

A. Background and pre-college experiences

1. To begin, how’s your day/week going so far?

2. Tell me about your experience growing up.

3. Can you recall any major success or challenges you have faced in life, and if so, tell me about them?

B. Transition to and in-college experiences

4. Why did you choose to attend college?

5. Can you tell me about a situation where you had to make a difficult decision in college? Tell me the story, how you handled the situation, and anything that influenced your decision.

C. Reflections/Observations on life

6. What advice would you offer other foster youth who aspire to attend college?
7. As I conclude, would you like to add anything else? Are there any areas that I did not address that are important to you?
   a. Thank you for your time and participation!
Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

National statistics indicate that approximately 10.5 million American children and youth comprise the foster care system in the U.S. on any given day. Additionally, we know that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among foster care youth with Latinos and African American males representing the fastest-growing groups. And while more than 20,000 youth exit the foster care system each year, we know relatively little from research about the post-discharge functioning of Black male youth emancipated from foster care.

To address this gap, we’ve partnered to study the postsecondary education experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care (BMCFFC). The goal of this study is to explore and familiarize educators, policymakers, and researchers about the lived experiences of BMCFFC.

We’re asking your help in identifying participants for this study. Specifically, we’re looking for individuals who (1) identify as “Black” or “African American” males, (2) are enrolled or were recently enrolled (last 3 years) full-time in a degree-granting college or university, and (3) identify as an emancipated foster care youth. Willing participants agree to sign a consent form, complete a short demographic questionnaire, and interview with one of us in-person or via telephone. Interviews will likely average 60 minutes and all interviews will be digitally recorded for transcription.

Incentive: All interviewees are entered into a raffle for a $25 Visa gift card.

If you are still interested in participating in the research and would like to schedule your interview, or if you have further questions, please contact us at amechi.2@osu.edu or strayhorn.3@osu.edu. Please refer to the attached consent form for further information regarding the study.

Best regards,

Terrell L. Strayhorn
Associate Professor

Mauriell H. Amechi
Graduate Student
Appendix C

Consent Form

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research
Study Title:
Refusing To Settle for Less:

Narratives of Self-Authorship among Foster Care Youth in College
Researcher: Terrell L. Strayhorn, Ph.D., Mauriell H. Amechi, B.A.

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.
Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:
The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the lived experiences of Black male collegians formerly in foster care (herein referred to as BMCFFC). More specifically, the aim of this study is to assess whether BMCFFC possess self-authored ways of knowing based on provocative pre-college and college experiences. Furthermore, the questions were designed to delve into the meaning foster youth attach to their experiences. To holistically capture and understand how foster youth construct meaning of who they are and where they belong in society, I rely on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Results of this study will help inform student affairs practice relevant to this under-served student population. Researchers seek to publish on the results obtained, hoping to add to the limited scope of empirical research on college student populations who emerge from foster care backgrounds.

Procedures/Tasks:
The study consists of a one-time, one-on-one semi-structured interview that will be used to assess your overall adjustment to college. First, you will also be asked to complete a demographic data form, in which you will be asked to provide a pseudonym to ensure
confidentiality. Demographic data form information will also be stored in a secure office location at Ohio State University. Next, as part of the interview, you will answer approximately seven questions related to your foster care background and overall adjustment to college. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, and recordings and notes will be stored in a secure office location at Ohio State University.

Duration:
Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes, which will consist of seven questions about your foster care background and overall adjustment to college. All interviews will be administered at The Ohio State University College of Education or via teleconference call (if necessary). You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:
There is very little risk involved with the research. The potential risks, harms or discomforts associated with the research are minimal. Participants may experience discomfort being put on the spot with questions related to their pre-college and college experiences, but they are not required to answer any question they do not wish to answer. Any risks would be minimal compared to the potential development of new and revision of existing policies that provide financial, psychological, and social support to Black male collegians from foster care backgrounds, which in turn can improve the college retention of foster youth in general and Black males in particular.

Confidentiality:
Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. Audio recordings will not contain identifiable information nor will any identifiable information you provide be linked to your answers.

There may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):
• Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
• The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices

Incentives:
All interviewees will be entered into a raffle for a $25 Visa gift card. One in ten will win the $25 Visa gift card. All incentives are contingent upon completion.

Participant Rights:
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State or another institution, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, complaints, or if you are injured as a result of participating in this study you may contact Mauriell Amechi, B.A. at amechi.2@osu.edu or Terrell L. Strayhorn, Ph.D. at strayhorn.3@osu.edu.
Letter of Consent

I, _____________________________, have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

AM/PM

Date and time

Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)

Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)

AM/PM

Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Signature of person obtaining consent

AM/PM

Date and time