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First-Generation African Americans in English Language Education

Abstract

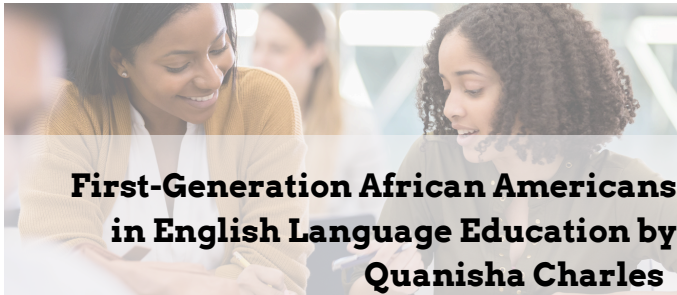
First-Generation (FG) African Americans enrolled in English language education programs, such as Teaching English as a Second Language, requires further exploration. This article raises awareness to challenges but also explores support systems that may be recognized as recruitment strategies and retention measures for leaders who are under-prepared to support FG African Americans in the English language education profession.

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Journal Articles



Introduction

This article contributes to academic research by examining the experiences of First-Generation (FG) African Americans enrolled in English language education, specifically programs like Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The lack of representation and acknowledgement of African American contributions to world languages not only does a disservice to the ever-growing international population arriving within the U.S. but also robs African Americans of enriching international experiences (Baker-Bell, 2020 & Anya, 2020). As a result, FG African Americans entering TESL programs may be met with a lack of mentors to sufficiently support their needs, a lack of faculty who understand their situation, and ultimately a limited recourse for thriving beyond their studies; they may be tasked with either obtaining support outside of their program or thriving solo and based on experiential knowledge. This paper offers inspiration to prospective FG African Americans and English language education stakeholders. Importantly, this work might also become a cornerstone for educators seeking ways to better serve FG African Americans in TESL programs. The purpose of this study is to highlight challenges faced by some FG African Americans in English language education programs and propose appropriate solutions for student success.

FG students are defined as students with at least one parent who did not complete the traditional undergraduate route to attaining a college degree. Research (Davis, 2022 & Frazier, 2020) often classifies FG synonymously with being of low socioeconomic status and person of color, but credentials, certificates, and other vocational qualifications can be obtained through various educational routes (e.g., trade schools), which means that some FG students can come from affluent backgrounds. Remembering my experience as an FG African American enrolled in a TESL program at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), barriers were clearly visible: obstacles getting acclimated to a rural town without family and friends, hardships navigating academia as a culture and getting acclimated to a new, and often esoteric, discourse of learning, being the only African American in the program, and feeling excluded in course content.

FG African Americans facing challenges at PWIs is not uncommon (Mickles-Burns, 2024) but was unexpected in a diverse program, like TESL. Second-guessing my purpose for being in the program became commonplace, unfortunately. These sentiments are seemingly common because other FG African American scholars (Davis, 2022; Sarcedo, 2022) have shared similar experiences at PWIs. "African American FGC [first-generation college] students also have less resources and a social network that does not consist of people that can adequately assist and guide them academically or professionally" (Green, 2015, p. 2). Acknowledging my lack of understanding of academia, grappling financial constraints, and lacking sufficient mentor support, often led to feelings of imposter syndrome. Nonetheless, self-

motivation to succeed, keeping the faith, traveling when possible, remaining in touch with family, and having a college companion fostered my success through the program. This article initiates conversations regarding support systems for FG African Americans in English language education programs, like TESL, with the intention of materializing recruitment efforts and instructional measures for department chairs and English language educators working with FG African Americans at PWIs. This article provides snapshots, based on a mini study that explores the following research questions:

1. What are some challenges faced by FG African Americans in English language education programs?

2. What are some solutions to assure college success for FG African Americans entering English language education programs?



Method

This qualitative research study was conducted at a four-year private liberal arts college located in the midwestern region of the U.S. during spring 2023. Participants were six undergraduate FG African Americans who had taken language study courses in English language education and one language education professor. Student participants were recruited via email and asked to sign a consent form. Once agreed, students were asked to complete a Microsoft Forms survey and engage in a follow-up recorded interview via Microsoft Teams for clarity of survey responses. Additional stipulations, if necessary, for student participants were to

devote no more than 1 hour (60-minutes) to evaluating material that is conducive to student retention, marketing tools, and/or pedagogical techniques. Faculty participants, once agreed, and if necessary, were asked to have one of their English language education classrooms observed, in which the researcher would be a detached spectator. There were 13-survey questions for both faculty and student participants. For faculty participants, survey questions asked about common student patterns in English language education courses, support systems required to better serve students, department marketing advice, student recruitment and retention strategies, and ways the department can be more supportive to students and faculty. For student participants, survey questions asked about challenges faced in the program, support systems required to better serve them, how can the department extend support, how can peers lend support, student retention and recruitment strategies, along with their inspiration for choosing their program of study. A thematic analysis (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016; Riger & Sigurvinsdottier, 2016) was used to code individual responses and identify emergent themes.

Results

The thematic analysis employed in this study resulted in the identification of support systems for FG African Americans enrolling in English language education programs. Findings are brief snapshots presented under two overarching themes that emerged from data collection of survey questions and virtual interviews with six student participants and one faculty participant. The challenges highlight the experiences of the students whereas the solutions provide student success highlights responses from both students and the faculty member.

Challenges: Belonging(ness)

Survey results showed that participants acknowledged that it was not easy writing about their culture and experiences at a PWI with a student explicitly noting *"It lacks diversity."* The significance of representation and seeing oneself in the curriculum and on campus is crucial for not only student success but maintaining a sense of belonging. Moreover, "Having a sense of belonging is vital for academic success as students that lack the feeling of fit can endure more social stress and academic difficulties" (Thornhill, Wied, Spooner, Terrazas, & Evans, 2023, p. 20). A lack of diversity in English language education programs and feeling no sense of belonging can take an emotional and physical toll on students as evidenced by one participant: *"One big challenge right now is having motivation because my mental health is not in a good place right now."* Another participant specifically focused on there being a lack of intersectionality with Black issues within the curriculum or campus events: *"Being a psychology student makes me feel like the department is out of touch and never talks about or incorporates Black people/events unless one of us bring it up, or it propels stereotypes in a mostly white classroom."* This student is experiencing a sense of invisibility (Jackson, Colson-Fearon, & Versey, 2022) within a department that is majority white and lacks awareness of issues deemed pressing by the student. The situation creates a tension wherein the student is likely observing ways in which stereotypes and microaggressions are unknowingly reinforced. Often FG African Americans entering PWIs feel not only new to the environment but also intimidated because they do not see many students or faculty who look like them; this creates a sense of uncertainty and a need to receive guidance from mentors (Nunn, 2019; Sarcedo, 2022). Some FG African Americans have used their social capital to foster relations and "find their village" in PWIs for academic

success (Breedon, Wallace, & Bryant, 2023). Thus, ensuring visible access to mental support and resources both from and for faculty (e.g., mentorship), is essential. Equally vital is the establishment of sustainable support systems.

Solutions: Support Systems

One of the first steps to ensuring sustainable support systems requires a marketing team that promotes the English language education program and the benefits of the degree to FG African Americans. Based on my conversation with student participants, many were either not aware of the value of English language education and took courses primarily as a prerequisite to other programs. It is important that FG African Americans get introduced to numerous opportunities whenever entering any educational program. The urgency of this matter necessitates students being acclimated to the benefits of language education programs in grade school as a means of proactively attracting students and helping FG African Americans get a head start on how to navigate PWIs. The need for early recruitment outreach initiatives centered on FG African American student success is especially critical for long-term success and sustainability. In general, research centered on FG students (Almeida, Byrne, Smith, & Ruiz, 2021; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Nunn, 2019) continues to show that students grapple with financial constraints that impact their sense of belonging and academic success. Many students joining English language education programs have a desire to teach abroad but are challenged by financial constraints and a limited recourse as noted by one student: *"I think Black centered spaces, financial resources, and representation in the staff [are needed support systems]".* Similarly, faculty may be faced with financial constraints. The faculty participant mentioned, *"Funding for out-of-the-classroom activities (e.g. association memberships or compensation for guest speakers) or*

purchasing support materials [are needed support systems]". Indeed, monetary resources to support both students and faculty are a necessity for the sustainability of English language education programs, student retention, and ultimately student success. Moreover, accountability is required to determine how these funds are being used and ways they have specifically benefitted FG African Americans.

Some student participants saw a need to focus on the quality of English language education programs rather than quantity with one participant sharing:

"I think one thing the school can do is understand the POC [people of color] students a little better. They don't understand how hard it is for us to go to school, especially in an environment we probably don't feel comfortable in or not wanted. With all the things I heard that have gone on that have dealt with poc students. I think that's one thing they can take more seriously."

The participant's sentiments are indicative of a desire to get a head start on learning about the students joining the college and programs, establishing rapport with students of color, and creating spaces where students feel like they can thrive comfortably. Some student participants highlighted the desire for more education regarding diverse cultures in the classroom. One student participant specifically mentioned, *"Educate more about other cultures, provide more incentives for Black and Brown students and teachers to choose [the institution]"* and another student participant noted, *"Peers/cohorts can better support me by making me feel included in a discussion or a topic. With that I would not feel left out"*. These are outcries for more support that represent and reflect the diversity of the student body. Retentive programmatic strategies to implement are FG fellowships and peer-groups for FG African Americans who struggle with getting acclimated to English

language education programs that are housed predominantly in PWIs. Peer-groups will help students quickly find their tribe (Breedon, Wallace, & Bryant, 2023). Funding earmarked specifically for peer-mentor groups, faculty mentors, job placements, and streamlining FG African Americans into their English language education program would be beneficial to not only the students who feel a sense of estrangement at PWIs but also to all stakeholders dedicated to providing educational and career support for the longevity of student success.

Discussion

FG programs that call for interest to showcase skill sets from Afro-centric viewpoints are a plus for FG African Americans who are new to PWIs. In general, FG programs comprising frequent events, such as FG celebration day, FG Fridays, FG dinners, and cultural trends, help students feel like they belong to academic communities. FG staff and faculty can also show support and solidarity by speaking at student events, hosting FG events, wearing FG attire, and more. These sorts of engagements create spaces for students to find their place of belonging, meet with professors and staff, and realize that there may be more people of color around campus. Another way to pique students' interest is creating affinity groups based on academic majors, (e.g., FG English language education groups), which have the potential to branch out into other endeavors, (e.g., peer collaborations on academic panels, publications), and so forth. Doing this helps students find friends, converse with like-minded individuals, engage in critical conversations, and find additional resources and support from their peers both domestically and internationally. While mentorship, tutoring services, and counseling services, are a strong starting point for FG African Americans, there is also a push for Black linguistic reparations (Austin & Anya, 2024) that acknowledges language biases and

barriers imposed onto students that may hinder their enrollment and performance in world language programs. English language education department chairs and stakeholders can introduce FG African Americans to strategies for being internationally competitive, multilingual collaborative opportunities, and invite personnel from the U.S. English Language Programs to discuss what it is like teaching English as a world language professional and how to participate (e.g., foreign language study as a gateway to studying/working abroad). Thus, early recruitment initiatives, international institutional partnerships, and semester exchanges with students from underfunded urban schools would certainly provide opportunities for FG African Americans to see the value of life abroad, world language programs, and pursue a degree in English language education, like TESL; it could also be seen as a reparatory gesture (Austin & Anya, 2024).

There are some limitations based on the findings of this study. There were only six participants who responded to the call and one faculty member, all of whom were female. The faculty participant in the study did not identify as African American nor did she have African Americans currently enrolled in her courses. Further research development is underway to explore pedagogical strategies for faculty anticipating an influx of FG African Americans in their language education courses. Research (Frazier, 2020) centered on FG African Americans show a need for behavioral modeling, mentorship, and financial support for students to become academically successful. Because there is a lack of enrollment from FG African Americans in English language education programs overall and this PWI study site in particular, this research is pivotal to understanding the challenges needed for student retention and long-term success. The purpose of the study was to identify challenges faced by FG African Americans in English language education

programs and propose appropriate solutions for student success. Based on current data collection from student and faculty participants, a lack of support, limited financial resources, faulty sense of belongingness, and uncertainty of career prospects remain common challenges. While every institution is different and more research is needed to draw significant conclusions, this article is an initiation into contemporary issues affecting FG African Americans in English language education programs at PWIs. Hopefully, this article behooves readers to conduct inventory on the demographics of FG African Americans (or the lack thereof) in their language education programs and advocate for sustainable support structures conducive to the longevity of their retention and success in the English language profession.

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