

Innovative Approaches to Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System in Fresno County: A Qualitative Exploration of Cultural Brokers and Parent Partners

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Marcus Crawford, MSW, PhD
California State University, Fresno.

Sarah Carr, MSW
California State University, Fresno.

James Borunda, MSW
California State University, Fresno.

Abstract

The problem of disproportionate representation of minority youth in systems care has been examined not as an aberration of the system but as an artifact of it. Cultural Brokers is an innovative program in Fresno County that intervenes during Child Protective Service (CPS) investigations to prevent out of home placement for African American youth. The Broker works with CPS and families to find alternatives to foster care placements. Parent Partners (or Partners) work with families whose children have been removed from the home and partner with the parents to assist them in making the changes needed for reintegration to occur. This qualitative exploration of the Cultural Brokers program sought to understand how the programs works from the perspective of the Brokers and Partners involved with the families. Individual interviews were conducted with each Broker and Partner to assess their understanding of their role within the child welfare system. Four themes emerged as we analyzed the data from interviews with the Brokers and Partners: building bridges, successes, trauma, and shared experiences.

Keywords: Parent Partner, Advocacy, Broker, Child Welfare, Disproportionality, Innovative.

1. Introduction

Every year, over 400,000 children enter out of home placement (OOH) in the foster care system in the United States (HHS, 2017). Youth of color, particularly African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American youth, are disproportionately represented among the children in out of home placements in the nation's foster care system (Assink et al., & Stams, 2018; Bowie, 2003; Crofoot & Harris, 2013; Horton & Watson, 2015; Krase, 2015; Shaw et al., 2008). The disproportionality of youth of color in the foster care system has sparked the curiosity of researchers across the nation to question what contributes to the disproportionality and to look at the disparity in outcomes of youth of color in the foster care system compared to other populations that enter the foster care system. This study explores an innovative solution to mitigating the entry of youth of color into out of home care through a unique program in the central valley of California, Cultural Brokers.

Disproportionality in the United States Foster Care System

The unearthing of disproportionality in the foster care system began over thirty years ago (Billingsley, & Giovannoni, 1972). Hill (2006) defines disproportionality as the difference in percentage of an ethnic group represented in the child welfare compared to the percentage of the ethnic group in the general population. From July of 1999 to June of 2018, Black children who entered foster care placement accounted for 22 percent of all children who entered foster care placement in the nation (Webster et al., 2020); yet, Black families only made up 12.9 percent of the

population in the United States (U.S. Census). Comparing this to white families who represented 32 percent of children who entered foster care placement while comprising 75.1 percent to the entire population.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the programming offered at Cultural Brokers. Cultural Brokers is a non-profit agency in Fresno, California that works alongside the Fresno County Department of Social Services to mitigate children of color entering foster care. The programs consist of the Cultural Brokers program and the Parent Partner programs with both programs offer innovative approaches to meeting specific child welfare needs. This study seeks to explore both the Cultural Brokers and Parent Partner programs to better understand what they do.

2. Literature Review

The problem of disproportionate representation of minority youth in systems care has been examined not as an aberration of the system but as an artifact of it (Crofoot& Harris, 2013; Hill, 2004; Huggins, 2011).The federal government has responded to this crisis with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) to reduce time in care and disproportionality. Analysis of ASFA has shown that decreases in time in foster care are associated with increases in placement for adoption; these changes are more pronounced in African American children even while successful adoptions are less likely (Haro, 2011; Iyalomhe, 2016).

California

According to the 2019 census, Black families accounted for 6.5 percent of the population in California, while white families constituted 71.9 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). From June 2018 to June 2019, black children accounted for 17.7 percent of the total number of children who entered foster care placement in California (Webster et al., 2020). According to the California Child Welfare Indicators Project, Black families are 2.79 times more likely to have an allegations of child maltreatment than white families (Webster et al., 2020).In California, responses to disproportionality need to focus on cultural barriers and sensitivity (Bowie, 2003). The disproportionality is heavily apparent in California and the state has scratched the surface in their efforts to mitigate children of color in the foster care system or address the disparity in outcomes for youth of color leaving the foster care system.

Fresno County

In examining county level data, areas with lower median incomes have higher rates of disproportionality in their foster care systems (Maguire-Jack et al., 2015). While Kim and colleagues (2018) found no individual basis for the disparity, they corroborated the findings. Fresno County's median income is about \$10,000 less than the national median income (DataUSA, 2018). In the year 2000, Black families made up 17.3 percent of children in foster care placement. This number lowered to 10.4 percent in 2019 to 2020. In Fresno County, disproportionality has decreased from 2000 to 2020; however, the rate of disproportionality is higher than the national average.

Outcomes of the Foster Care System

The discussion of disproportionality goes hand-in-hand with the disparity of outcomes for youth of color in the United States leaving the foster care system. McLean (2013) found that African American youth who are placed in out of home care have longer stays and worse outcomes than Caucasian youth who are placed in out of home care. The disparity in outcomes is well-documented (Bowie, 2003; Crofoot& Harris, 2013; Shaw et al., 2008).

Disparity in Outcomes

Outcomes for youth who enter foster care placement have shown to be dire (Huggins-Hoyt, et al., 2019; Magruder & Shaw, 2008; Wilson &Kastanis, 2015). Recent studies have shown youth tend to struggle with multifarious issues upon their departure of the foster care system such as health (Villegas, et al., 2011), homelessness (Narendorf, et al, 2020), lack of educational attainment (Villegas, et al., 2014), employment (Harris, et al., 2009), and conflict within the criminal justice system (Youngmin & Wildeman, 2018). Hill (2004) defines disparity in the context of youth of color

in the child welfare system as the inequitable treatment and outcomes of youth of color compared to children in other ethnic groups.

Institutional Racism

Reasoning for why youth of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system is complex and difficult to attribute to one cause. Researchers attribute disproportionality and disparity to the institutional racism in the foster care system. Hill (2006) provided an example of systemic racism such as, “they lived in two-parent families, they had at least one employed parent, neither parent abused drugs... they lived in low crime neighborhoods, and they had no prior CPS history,” remained in home with family maintenance services as opposed to entering foster care placement (Hill, 2006). This study prompted the question if Black children had these advantages would they still enter foster care placement. A study conducted by the U.S. Children’s Bureau (1997) found that even with the same advantages, Black children would still enter foster care placement. Gourdine (2019) attributed this to the implicit bias of social workers and mandated reporters. More recent studies have confirmed black children remain at a disadvantage due to their race to enter foster care placement (Huggins-Hoyt, et al., 2019; Kelly & Varghese, 2018; Lens, 2019).

Mentorship Programs

Innovative approaches are necessary to tackle the complex issues that arise in child welfare cases (Chambers et al., 2018; Krase, 2015). Both the Cultural Brokers and Parent Partner programs offer such innovative ideas. A thorough search of literature for programs like Parent Partners uncovered six studies, two of which used foster parents as mentors (Miller et al., 2017; Marcenko et al., 2015) and two of which were not foster care specific (Davis et al., 2011; Drabble et al., 2016). Two studies examined programs with parent partners but did not have outcomes, instead focusing on the design and implementation of the program (Berrick, et al., 2010; Cohen & Canon, 2006). While Cultural Brokering theory has developed in nursing and health, its application in child welfare is less tested (Jezewski, 2005; Montana et al., 2010).

Aspects of cultural brokering are evident in some practices in child welfare such as family group decision making (Marcenko et al, 2015). Despite this, no literature was located that examined a program utilizing intervention at the investigation stage to decrease disproportionality in the African American community. The program in Fresno County appears to be unique in that regard.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the programming offered at Cultural Brokers. The programs evaluated consisted of the Cultural Brokers program and the Parent Partner programs. Both programs offer innovative approaches to meeting specific child welfare needs to address disproportionality and disparity for youth of color in the foster care system.

3. Methods

This qualitative exploration of the Cultural Brokers program sought to understand how the programs work from the perspective of the Brokers and Partners involved with the families. Individual interviews were conducted with each Broker and Partner to assess their understanding of their role within the child welfare system. Participants were asked about how they work with social workers at Child Protective Services (CPS) and how they work with families who are referred to CPS for an investigation. Specific attention was paid to asking about the role of the broker in interrupting the removal of African American children from their homes and how they ensure safety of the children and families. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for themes using a constant comparative analysis.

Participants

Participants in this study included nine employees from the Cultural Brokers or Parent Partners programs (four Cultural Brokers and five Parent Partners). There was a total of six female participants and three male participants. For this study, the researchers used individual interviews to collect qualitative data. There was a total of nine recorded interviews using the thematic analysis. All participants in this study were referred to us by the program director and founder of Cultural Brokers. Isabella, Jamel, Ricardo, Megan, and Adriana were Parent Partners. Amelia, Sofia, Selene, and Jeffrey

were Cultural Brokers. They will be designated with (PP) or (CB) after their names for clarification in the results section.

Materials

Prior to the qualitative interviews, informed consent forms were used containing information about procedures, benefits and risks of participating, an explanation how to acquire the results of the research, availability of counseling services, voluntary participation, and contact information of the researchers. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide of questions designed by the researchers. The guide included questions regarding their day to day practices, the impact of their work, their history in coming to work there, and their goals in doing the work they do. This research was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at CSU, Fresno.

Design and Procedure

As participants arrived they were asked to have a seat and sign the informed consent form. At this time the interviewer requested verbal consent to audio recording of the interviewee. Consent of the recording can be found on every recorded interview before questions were administered. After obtaining informed consent, the researcher notified the participant that they may cease the interview at any time and that their identities would remain confidential. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes based on how in-depth the participants were willing to discuss the questions. Steps were taken to ensure that the information provided by the employees could not be linked to them so certain details of their stories were omitted or changed as necessary to ensure anonymity.

4. Results

Grounded theory and constant comparison guided the analysis of the interview transcripts. Four themes emerged from the analysis: building bridges, successes, trauma, and shared experiences.

Building Bridges

The theme Building Bridges emerged from interviews with both the Parent Partners and the Cultural Brokers. Both stated they felt like they helped created a partnership between the parents and families with the social workers from Child Protective Services (CPS). Jamel stated that he is not the social worker so he is there to advocate for the family to the social worker. To facilitate bridge building, Isabella asks her parents, "How can I help you get along with the social worker?" Bridge building occurs in many ways though. Sofia does it through language:

So I'm here to build a bridge to make sure that you guys are all on one accord. So lingo, you know if you say something and maybe the social worker doesn't get it, I can explain it to the social worker. Social worker says something and [the parent] don't get it, I'll explain it to them.

Amelia goes further, saying she is "a voice for the parents." She continues, discussing her role in assisting parents complete their court ordered classes and assessments. Megan confirms this by saying that she "works behind the scenes [because] who's a better person to handle [a problem] than the people who know it?" Sofia also discussed the importance of bridging the language divide. All of the acronyms and words are confusing to parents and she helps them understand what is being discussed when the social workers forget to explain things.

Another aspect of bridge building is working with social workers. Selene discussed that some social workers have never experienced anything like what the parents have gone through.

Well, for workers it's kind of hard because you know, there's some good workers and there's some judgmental ones. The minute they read the paper and let me tell you that report that they did on me, I was bad, but I still had a heart. You know, I was an addict, I was hurting myself. But what they wrote about me was so like, who is that? You know? And those workers get that first and already they're angry or mad or feel like, how did they do that? Don't judge us. Help us. You got our kids to be safe. Help us learn what you're talking about. Isabella talks with social workers about their first meeting with parents during an investigation.

I mean you knock on my door and you're telling me how I'm supposed to discipline my kids and you don't discipline nobody. You know, so it makes it, it makes it kind of hard because sometimes it can be you know it can get under your skin and I have to let them know and I tell them

all the time it starts with the knock on the door. Isabella continues by discussing how she helps to navigate community opinions about social workers and CPS with families and with social workers.

Cause I want to keep [the parents'] trust, you know, cause they're trusting in me to talk to me. They trust me to be their support, you know, because they don't have to trust, they have no trust already with the social worker. They have no trust at all for CPS, you know, so for them to have that trust with me.

Finally, in building bridges, many of the workers felt they helped social workers and families cross cultural divides. Jamel stated simply that he was able to do this because he is "not a social worker" referring again to the automatic distrust for social workers in some communities. He said, "What I went through to kind of open their eyes and help them more because a lot of parents got a perspective of social workers, like they're just all bad or you know, something like that."

Megan discusses how her experience being a parent with children removed improves her ability to connect with both the social worker and the parent:

I can understand what this parent is going through, but I do understand what the social workers are talking about as well because I've been on, I'm on both sides. Yeah. So to talk to the parent and tell them in the meetings and stuff like that [that] this is a good option for you because if you're ready for a change, you're ready.

Adriana talks about the helping parents through difficult meetings. She discussed parents getting upset and leaving meetings:

I'm like, because if you show this to them, you're showing that to your kids and you give up on them. You might've want to walk out and never come back cause that's exactly what's going on. You're not gonna get those kids back... I tell them, you need to get up right now. You need to get up because you cannot give up right now. You need to be strong for those kids because they are the ones that are in foster care, not you.

Adriana said she has always been able to bring a parent back into the meeting. Sofia has also helped parents remain calm when they were upset at things in the meeting. She feels free to talk with parents "in a way that the social worker can't say „The way you're acting is not necessary.”"

Amelia discussed the difference in language between spank and whipping. She explained the African American culture a parent may say they are giving their child a whipping, which sounds like a beating to some people. This may be one swat though. Amelia said the divide in the African American community with social workers is difficult:

Because what happens within the African American community, there's always been that divide. There's always been that mistrust between African American community and the department. That's just, everybody knows that. So when you knock on the door, and even though we wear badges, we have to tell them. That's why I let them know I don't work for them. I work with them. We're here to help you. You know, and I'm here especially to help you. And when you separate yourself, then you separate some of that tension. That's what I see. Sometimes they let us in the door when they don't want to let the social worker in the door. I'm like, no, they're fine.

Ricardo agrees, saying that he reassures parents that:

We're on your side. You know, like let them know because they get intimidated by badge cause we carry a badge like county badge and they get intimidated by that. We let them know that we're not County Workers, we're there for them. We've been through the same path that they're going through.

Successes

The theme for successes emerged from interviews with the Parent Partners. The Cultural Brokers have a narrow and specific goal: At the initial referral to CPS, avoid out of home placement into foster care by arranging an alternative kin placement or establishing a safety plan. As such, their discussions of successes centered around this. Amelia stated succinctly that "For me [success is] when we get to keep kids at home. Yeah. That's success for me. Yeah. That's the best feeling."

For Parent Partners, who have a broader mission and longer period working with families, success can be quite different. Jamel stated that success as a Parent Partner “is doing what you need to do, like to get [parents] to reunify with their kids.” He elaborated:

It means that the parent comply with each and every thing they had to like from the social workers to the programs that they're in... successfully getting their kids, keeping they appointments on times, coming to the self-helps that, the little groups here, all this stuff like that and...keeping off drugs and to change they life... that's great success.

Adriana said that her goal is to help parents.

Help them reach out, help them connect help them understand the system help them understand themselves and their kids and, and all that. That's my whole goal. My whole goal is to help them reunify with their kids. And get them out of here.

Adriana expanded on this, stating that her goal is to help parents understand the system and its goal so they never end up back in the system. She does this by showing them the supports that they have and recognizing their own strengths. Isabella said she defines success differently for every family.

“It's whatever we worked on. Like whether it was moving up to unsupervised visits, moving up to third party visits, completing a drug program, completing VFM services.” Ricardo said his definition of success knows that he helped the parents. He came to work for Parent Partners because his old social worker from when his children were in foster care told him about a program where he “could help other parents that went through the same thing [that he] did.” He knew instantly he wanted to do it. Megan stated:

This program is what parent's need. It's so positive. Parents that don't have it, they don't have support. Some parents don't have anything. Some parents have mental health illnesses that you can't, even, social workers can't even get to them. And sometimes we can, you know, some people parents are, don't even want to change yet, but having the support of a parent partners seeing us that we actually doing it, doing it were real life a testimony, we'd done it.

Trauma

The Parent Partners and the Cultural Brokers both spoke with the difficulty that parents have in navigating the system and managing their trauma histories at the same time. Megan said “It is scary. So it was, it was scary. It's overwhelming.” Selene discussed how they help parents by doing “referrals for those parents that are alone lost and don't know which way to turn.”

Selene continued, talking about how hard it is for parents to continue when everything seems so overwhelming: “The kids are gone, you're dead. You gotta figure it out. And that's where we come in. That's when we come in.” Megan talked about being at the table with the parents during meetings with the social workers.

I know how that parent feels, either they're scared to crying, they're ashamed, they're depressed, they're, you know, rock bottom. Because what's going to happen is either your kids are gonna go home with you, your kids can get removed, or your kids are gonna stay, you know, with family, there's three outcomes. So it's, you don't know what it's like. You're being not judged, but your actions, your choices are on that table and... it's gonna come out what happened.

Sofia described the experience as “daunting” for parents. “Parents come in and your children are taken, people are saying this and that you don't know where to turn. And sometimes people are just, the process is longer,” Sofia said. Isabella reported this about the CPS process:

[It] can break you down, it can take you places. It can make you feel like you're the most hateful, shameful. I mean, they can make you feel like you're a monster sometimes and you know, because you lost, you know, your kids are not with you.

Isabella talked about the trauma that parents experience and how important it is to share this with the social workers.

These parents didn't ask to be like this. Some of them were born like this, some of them were born into gangs, some of them were born into domestic violence because that's what they saw growing

up. That's all they know. So to be able to tell [the social workers], you know these parents have been through some trauma themselves. So there's a reason why they're there's drug use. There's a reason why there's domestic violence. There's a reason why there are sexual molestation and not saying that that's okay, but there's a reason behind everything. Everybody's had some kind of trauma in their lives.

For many of the workers, their experiences with trauma mirrored those of the parents they assisted. Ricardo talked about a father “going in and out of prison after prison” in his life. Megan had the same experience with the father of her children. Megan described when he would come home from prison:

And then I would see him again, get pregnant and then him go back. I mean, you're raising these kids by myself alone, alone, alone to where I was at the end where I was, I was just depressed to where my was my rock bottom.

The agency recognizes this concern and offers a monthly session to discuss the secondary and vicarious trauma they may experience. Jamel said this of the monthly sessions:

You need it. You know, it's a, it's a trigger while I'm sitting at the table, and I'm hearing stories about how kids are being treated and drug use and these make you think about your situation or what you went through. You gotta be like emotionally strong.

Megan described this time as “therapy time” for them where they can bring up anything they may be dealing with. Adriana discussed how the sessions help prepared her to share her story with strangers:

So I don't think I would've been able to help a parent and talk about the domestic violence without bawling and crying. The, the pain of my children being removed was still so, so fresh to me that I don't think I'll be able to talk like I am talking to you right now about it and not cry in our breakdown.

Ricardo wished he had had a Parent Partner when his children were in custody. Of the monthly sessions, he

said:

Even though they don't seem like much these cases can break you. There are cases there that are going to trigger you, you know like there are going to bring flashbacks in, like remind you of what you were going through. So we have to have that clinical support and, and just talk about it so we can clear our minds and stuff like that. That works.

Megan provided a detailed description of the sessions:

We come in as a group. Whatever we talk about stays in there. We get to vent about what we're dealing with in our families, our children, what they're going through.

What we're dealing with. I'd bring back some triggers for me and I felt emotional because I know that those, those are still things that you know, affect me because it's, it's traumatizing to me and you know what I mean? The things we carry with ourselves to unload it, to put it somewhere.

Isabella also felt the sessions were helpful, saying, “We need to put it somewhere. You just can't carry it and carry it and carry it.” In the meetings, they get feedback from each other, tips on working with a family, and encouragement to keep going. Isabella reported being about the “to dump something off” in the sessions. For Isabella, this has helped her tell her story:

We're not afraid to tell our stories. We're not afraid to stand in front of a crowd and, and share our experience, strengths, and hopes...We're a pretty strong team.

In any way that we can help somebody, we're going to do what we can. We're not afraid. We're pretty strong to learn how to deal with what life throws at us. Especially when we were doing the trainings for the new social workers when they put me as lead.

Shared Experiences

Many of the workers, both Cultural Brokers and Parent Partners, had shared experiences in common with parents they assist. In many ways, this continues the theme of trauma but applied to the workers lives and how it influences their help with the families. Jamel talked about wanting to give up

when his children were in foster care:

It was overwhelming for me but through the grace of God I, I got through it and yeah, I just like to share my story with them, let them know where I come from. Because a lot of stories out here is like I feel like giving up. I don't want to do this. I tell him my story.

Megan talked about “the bumps and bruises” that she got along the way while getting her kids back. Megan recognizes that “I'm not that person no more and I've changed myself so much for my kids and myself to become the best parent I can.” In Megan's experience, she hit rock bottom when her children were taken away. She said, “Who would've thought that a recovering drug alcoholic could become this person that can give back and help another person.” For Megan, this is how she helps a parent.

So you gotta face it and it's your choice to do what you want the help or do you want to stay in that same place you were? Yeah. So I understand. So I can, I can understand what this parent is going through [because] I'm on both sides.

Ricardo is often assigned to fathers because he says they are often sidelined in the process. He uses his experience with the child welfare system to help the father advocate to get his children back. Ricardo says he has been judged because of what was on paper about him but he works with social workers and parents to understand that there is more than just what was written down. Ricardo talked about being a Hispanic man and how that role can be difficult to navigate a system where you have to ask for help:

You see parents that don't get help because of the pride. Because they don't understand what, as a Hispanic, a lot of people have that pride or they, they don't understand what you're saying and they're just hesitant. But honestly, they don't, if you ask them what did they just say, if you ask them to repeat it, they won't, they won't. They don't know.

For Selene, the process of getting clean and sober was a good journey to a healthy life. Her positive experience is related to the strong supports that she had: “Because my kids believed in me and I believed in me, and people who know me believed in me.” Jamel discussed going through the process to get his children back. He tells parents about this when they meet. He is a Parent Partner today “because I want to help those that made the same mistakes I made.” Simply telling parents their story and that they had children in foster care can change the dynamic of a meeting, according to Adriana. She tells parents about the cop who called her a “piece of shit mom” and the social worker who judged everything about her like her life was written in a textbook. She uses those experiences “to be that inspiration for those parents. I want to be able to talk about if my story is gonna help the next person, I want to be able to help somebody.”

Isabella tells of the District Attorney who told her that she would never reunify her children and how that motivated her to get her kids back.

That gave me all the power in the world to prove her wrong. And so you know, I chased after my recovery, like I chased after my drug and that, I think that's what helped me get through it. And so I like to share with parents, like don't give up, you know, don't give up just because one person is saying no, that doesn't mean it's no, that just means what do I gotta do to get that person to say yes, you know?

5. Discussion

Cultural Brokers offers two programs for families involved with the child welfare system in Fresno County. The Cultural Brokers act as an early intervention to prevent the removal of children from African American and Black families. Working with social workers, they help to create safety plans to maintain children at home or help to approve kinship placements so that the children are diverted from the formal foster care system. While we are not able to conclusively state that Cultural Brokers is the cause, the rate of disproportionality has dropped in the last decade since Cultural Brokers began this program.

Parent Partners offers a unique approach to providing mentoring services to parents whose children have been removed from their homes. By providing mentors who have previously had their children removed, the Parent Partners program creates a relationship where the parent can better trust

the mentor and where the mentee can better understand the challenges facing the parent.

Both the Cultural Broker and Parent Partner programs offer innovative practices that seek to change the child welfare system. Dismantling the disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system has been a challenge for social workers for decades. Programs like these can provide useful insight into practices that may help.

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