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Why are African American Males Dropping out of High School? A Case Study

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WHY DO AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL?

A CASE STUDY

By

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Prelude to the Study

The disparity in the school performance of African American males can be tied to school, cultural factors, as well as individual choice. This achievement gap has appeared in grades, test scores, employment figures, and high school and college graduation rates. After decades of desegregation efforts our gap between white and black student achievement is wider than ever, only in the 1980's did it temporarily shrink. There are educators, families, and public officials who know that more work must be done in order remedy this disparity.

In my view one of the central objectives of a school system, is to provide all students with a quality education that leads them to becoming productive members of a society. Yet, decades following the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, academic success remains a challenge in public education for African American students. Many scholars, as shown in the literature review, indicate the educational system should shoulder part of the blame for this dilemma. Roland (2012) explained that although some progress has been achieved with policy fundamentals centered on resources, accountability, and required standardized testing for students, academic success for all students has not been attained or fully realized.(p. i) However, some researchers suggested that with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and adequate yearly progress (AYP) accountability measures, increased attention has been focused on improving the success rate for all students, especially African American male students.

At the same time, the greater diversity of school populations and the rapid growth of the number of students of color have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues. The

African-American male national on-time graduation rate data is evidence that systemic changes must occur to address the academic failure they experience. A significant gap in achievement exists when the Black male on-time graduation rate is compared to that of their white male peers. It is possible that some students do not graduate on-time due to retention that may occur after they have entered the ninth grade. While factors associated with societal issues and family dynamics contribute to this problem, Jones (2011) states that “factors associated with public school practices and procedures are more often the focus of studies on the topic of minority graduation rates and the associated achievement gap” (p. 6) In fact, Education Week reported as recent as March 2015, that there were 8,306 dropouts daily (High School Drop Out Statistics, p. 1), which amounts to over three million per year. These dropout rates reflect high school dropouts in general no specific ethnicity was mentioned, I refer to it in order to high light the fact that there is a problem of students dropping out in our nation. A problem that I believe can be most beneficially examined by researchers of varying viewpoints, for example people of different moral, ethnic, or religious perspectives. In this way, educators and policy makers can recognize common threads that exist among young people of varying backgrounds, as well as be able to empathize with struggles unique to any varying group within our society. For it is my belief that any ethical educator or legislator will want to see all young students find their way to becoming productive members of our society.

According to Education week (2015) dropouts seeking employment report that they are eligible for ten percent or less of jobs. (High School Drop Out Statistics, p. 1) Given the clear detrimental economic and personal costs to high school drop outs, why do young people dropout of high school in such large numbers? Almost every elementary and middle school student

reports ambitions that include high school graduation and at least some college. Why are so many dreams cut short? What steps should be taken to turn the tide?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to approach the dropout problem from a perspective that I believe can always continue to offer new insights – that of the students themselves. I focused specifically on the perspective of the African American male student. My guiding question throughout the duration of this study was; *why are African American males dropping out of high school?* These efforts were designed to paint a more in-depth picture of who these young people are, why they dropped out of high school, and what might have helped them complete their high school education. I wanted to do as Brdigeland (2006) did and;

“give their stories and insights a voice, and to offer possible next steps, in the hope that this report could be a further wake-up call to educators, policymakers, community leaders and the public to summon the national will to address the high school dropout epidemic.”

(p. i)

Myself being an African American male who dropped out of high school years ago, I am interested in comparing my experience to the experiences of other African American males, in hopes to better understand my own teenage experiences. In the United States in 2012, there were 40 million Americans who had never graduated from high school (Rumberger, 2012, p. 1). As I have become more educated, I have become more aware of the myriad of factors that many of my African American male peers were not able to overcome. Such as when Rumberger (2012) states that of those 40 million dropouts;

“The majority face bleak economic futures, or at least poorer prospects than their peers

who have graduated. In all likelihood, they will face poorer health. Adults who do not graduate face a lower life expectancy by nine years, and they are 6 times more likely to be incarcerated.” (p. 1)

When I grew up it was pretty common knowledge amongst my friends and young people that I was around, if you don't finish high school your life will be put on a fast track to trouble. So I ask; why then, are African American males dropping out of high school? Even though I dropped out, I would go on to earn my General Education Diploma, Bachelors of Arts, and to be currently working on completing a Masters degree. Given that reality, I tend to think my success was a result of my hard work and perseverance. However, the more I learn the more I question if maybe I was more privileged than I realized in some ways. Maybe not by money, but by where I lived, certainly by the people I was around, or what kind of schools I attended. Perhaps when teachers and administrators saw my face, they gave me a chance? Could it be that my African American peers were not always given that chance? These are some of the questions I have asked myself that I cannot answer.

My hope is upon completion of the study I would have some answers to at least some of the questions that I have wondered about in my past. I hope to help change the system at a school or individual level. Serve as a helping hand to the next generation coming up, who may be in need of guidance, support, and kindness. At the very least, by educating myself and offering this study, I hope to be part of the solution and not a part of the problem.

Research Question

This capstone project will provide research and reporting from African American males about their experiences of, and opinions about, their reasons for leaving high school. This information is critical to understand the low graduation rates, which according to Dempsey

(2012) is a “national epidemic” (p. 1). My study focuses on *why African American males leave high school*. The research has been conducted through a qualitative inquiry. This was accomplished through a sample of African-American non-graduates from a local urban community in order to provide an in-depth analysis.

Conclusion

The body of the study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, Introduction, includes the following: prelude to the study, the purpose of the study, research question, and conclusion. Chapter two, the Literature Review, is organized around four clusters of factors that influence high school graduation and ends with conclusions and implications. Subheadings included in this chapter are: overview, Environment/Cultural factors, Family factors, School factors, and Self. Chapter three, Methodology, includes an introduction, the research question, the research design, participants, instruments and data collection, research methods and procedure, and limitations. Chapter four, Results, begins with an introduction followed by the interview I conducted, revealing of the results, and a summary. Chapter five, conclusions, will begin with an introduction, than we will go into the summary of the findings, discoveries of the study, the significance of the study, followed by limitations and a summary.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The following literature review represents an investigation of current research relative to the topic of African American male dropout rates. Through the literature review, a consideration and determination of what is known about this topic will be uncovered. Additionally, the literature review helps to inform the project of larger conceptual issues that are relevant to the identified research question: Why are African American males dropping out of high school?

Because this topic appears to have many answers at first, the literature review is divided into the following four groupings: Environment/Community Factors, Family, School Issues, and research relating to the Self Concept. These groups are not exhaustive by any means, but do provide an organizational tool from which to study the problem. These are clusters of information found during the literature review, not distinct categories. They were designed in order to aid in refining the research questions, as well as identify major concepts that are implied within the research question of this capstone project.

Within the category Environment/Community Factors, are studies that illuminated the following societal/cultural issues at the neighborhood, local, regional, and/or state levels. For example, poverty, community involvement, racism, and public health all fall under this umbrella. Next, Family studies may include income, parenting styles, familial support, and expectations relative to school progression. The School issues category encompasses topics such as social promotion, teacher characteristics, culture/school life, classroom environment, and presence of role models. The category centering on the individual is called Self Concept. This includes

studies that targeted questions and outcomes regarding an awareness of racism as it affected self, such as identity issues, peer acceptance and peer values.

These clusters are not discrete, and the grouping is by no means complete, it simply reflects what was identified during the literature review, and is intended as a tool to organize the volume of recent research in this complicated area relative to the research question for this capstone.

Environment and Community

In this section, at least ten sources are summarized to help ascertain the scope of the problems related to the causes of the dropout rate. Leading researchers, scholars, and community leaders continue to analyze the effects of the society in which these African American male teenagers live. Whether centuries of racism, remnants of social oppression or cultural differences are to blame, these studies feature broad concepts as well as data that support the influence of the wider community on these youth.

Dr. Washington (2012) attributed “poor academic performance to psychological, sociological and environmental variables” (p. 10) which she described as a “remnant of racism” (p. 10). Her research took place in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). She described how over-represented African Americans are in special education, specifically those with learning disabilities. The alarming statistic she found was that “less than 20% of African American Students with a learning disability in a general education setting (for this district) scored at proficiency or advanced on their standardized assessment” (Washington, 2012, p. 2).

In addition to the data, Washington’s (2012) major contribution perhaps is that she encourages educational research to use more holistic measures. In the past, she asserts that “research has missed a personal perspective that is greatly needed when studying youth”

(Washington, 2012, p. 2). This research is grounded in critical race theory that seeks to include counter stories primarily through individual interviews from those who have dropped out of high school, rather than analyzing from the distance.

Washington (2012) explains that it appears as though the lack of higher graduation rates is a lifespan issue, and not isolated to a high school or late adolescent issue (p. 2). While some studies focus on younger children, a host of studies have focused on what happens after the high school period, which support that the dropout issue pertains to a variety of citizens. For example, it was found that even if an African American graduates high school and gains entrance into college, he is often faced again with great obstacles. The continuum or hurdles faced by these youth have been studied by Dr. Rowland (2001), who found that “basic models of learning development, and program planning in adult education have often been developed with little concern for the unique needs of African Americans” (p. 1). A more recent book came to similar conclusions. Zambrana (2009) documented “retention issues as well as challenges for individual persistence to continue studies” (p.74), in college and adult education.

Poverty and neighborhood characteristics have also been studied extensively as possible root causes of the lack graduation for so many African American over the last few decades. For example, Lofstrom (2007) asked why dropout rates are so high in the United States. Using data from Texas, he showed that poverty is a key contributor and risk factor towards dropout rates (p. 2). While analyzing the information, Lofstrom (2007) noted that it was important to keep in mind that The Texas Micro data Panel (TSMP) data did not always line up to other state data. For example, if a student withdraws from a Texas school with an intent to enroll elsewhere, the student is an official other leaver, and not a dropout, regardless if he/she ever attends that second school. In other words, this reduces the number of official dropouts being counted. He found that

the term drop out does not include home-schooled teenagers, transfers to private schools, youth who moved out of state, or those who passed away. It is important to know the definitions of data points before interpretation. There was no mention of data for homeless students.

An additional factor that may be a cause of high dropout rates is school size and/or school location. While Lofstrom (2007) reports (for Texas) that school size does not significantly alter an individual student's decision to leave school, the schools "average pupil teacher ratio is found to affect dropout probability positively and significantly" (p. 19). He summarized that the location of school appears to be a factor, although not necessarily causative for individual dropout decisions. The study found that lower graduation rates were present at schools closest to the center of large cities, but he cautioned that "these attributes (low graduation rate and location within city) are not assumed to be related" (Lofstrom, 2007, p. 19). However, he did find that "students who had been held back a grade were substantially more likely to drop out" (Lofstrom, 2007, p. 22). In other words, grade retention does seem to be a predictor of future dropout behavior. Lofstrom (2007) stresses that the probability of dropout rate is most likely linked to poverty.

In a related publication, Kusimo (1999) studied poverty and African Americans in the rural south. Dr. Kusimo's interest was in elucidating the legacy of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in this area. The study was spread out over eleven of the southern states, referred to by Kusimo as the Black Belt. Kusimo (1999) explained that at the time of the study, "the region had the lowest proportion of African American college graduates 6.1% when compared to other parts of the country" (p. 3). "The region also had the highest proportion of young adults who had not completed high school at 29.4% (male and females included)"

(Kusimo, 1999, p. 4). The author concluded that the link to poverty is a primary factor for African Americans who do not graduate high school.

Dr. Kusimo (1999) links racial desegregation of the South to a deterioration of community relationships for African American students. Formerly in the days of segregation, African American children went to school with African American educators. In contrast, in 1996 According to the National Education Association (2007), African American teachers comprised only 7.3% of the teaching forces in public schools (as cited in Kusimo, 1999, p. 4). Kusimo (1999) found “During the times of segregation, children were able to see teachers as surrogate figures, disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates” (p. 5).

Recently, there has been a growing interest in moving the problem of school dropout rates from schools to the umbrella of a public health crisis. Advocates such as the American Public Health Association remind educators “youth are especially vulnerable to their environments, principally because of their real and perceived inability to impact the world around them” (Wright, 2011, p. 2). Wright (2011) found that “structural inequities like funding disparity” (p. 3), harm the vulnerable students. Through an adoption of “intentioned social systems and school-based health centers that prioritize students, encourage community, and increase a positive school climate” the larger environmental issues can be solved (Wright, 2011, p. 3).

A publication of the United States Center for Disease Control supports the above study. Freudenberg & Ruglis (2007) believe in the importance of education as setting the stage for health later in life. They summarized that “good education predicts good health, and disparities in health and in educational achievement are closely linked” (p. 2).

For the most part Freudenberg & Ruglis (2007) realize that the issues of health and graduation rates are somewhat circular, and interrelated. They explain that improving health of students will be reflected in an increase in graduation rates. “This would be followed by positive health benefits of graduation, due to higher wages and better employment possibilities” (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007, p. 3). According to Freudenberg & Ruglis (2007) because all teenagers are susceptible to a multitude of health challenges and risks, such as substance use/abuse, psychological, emotional, and behavioral concerns, prioritizing their health is indeed important.

Furthermore, Freudenberg & Ruglis (2007) explain that due to living in poverty the parents’ health (of the high school students) may also be a consideration for the high schoolers. “Students may leave school to work or assist a family member with health issues” (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007, p. 4). To provide a larger context, According to Freudenberg & Ruglis (2007) “early parenting affects the dropout rate as well for all students: about 30 to 40% of female dropouts in the United States are mothers, and about 20% of the nation’s dropouts were fathers at the time that they dropped out” (p. 3).

An additional study that is relevant to Community factors under consideration is by Jackson & Beaudry (2012). They implore community leaders, educators, and families to fight for these young men and abandon the willful neglect that still pervades schools. They recognize there is not a standard fix for every school or town. In their findings, which are largely a state by state summary of data, they note that “the states with relatively small black populations achieve higher graduation rates for African American males than states with higher percent of African American” (Jackson & Beaudry, 2012, p. 23-4). For example, Maine, Utah, Vermont, and Idaho show the highest proportion of young African American males graduating. Jackson & Beaudry

(2012) state “this indicates that African Americans achieve more academically than when they are not relegated to under-resourced schools” (p. 25). In other words, when provided the same opportunities, they are more likely to produce similar outcomes as their peers.

On the other hand, students living in economically disadvantaged areas are “inundated by negative social and environmental factors” (Washington, 2012, p. 42). Washington (2012) found that “Numerous parents of African American children and youth try to isolate their children from negative influences in their communities” (p. 42). Some studies focused on developing positive supports already noted in the communities to continue the improvements being made with the dropout rate. Rolland (2011) identified factors influencing student success such as: “supportive parents, caring teachers, positive school environment, peer support, and community initiatives” (p. i). Here we see that the quality of the environment surrounding students of color can clearly have an impact on their ability, or lack thereof to be academically successful.

Family

The author Christian Friend (2009) aimed to “reframe the blame game” (p. 2) that seemed to circulate in and around education and child development circles. The blame game refers to a situation in which one party blames others for something bad or unfortunate rather than attempting to seek a solution. Instead he sought to answer “What can African-American families do to promote the academic success of their children” (Friend, 2009, p. 2). He explains that education in America may have many purposes, but one of its main purposes is to “provide youth basic skills and knowledge needed to effectively function within American society” (Friend, 2009, p. 4). To put it another way, the education system promotes “the internalization of societal values and this system reflects values of the larger society” (Friend, 2009, p. 4). This sociological view provides another way of looking at a system of education that poses so many

barriers for African American youth. Friend (2009) chose to study parental racial socialization and its' affect on academic achievement. Specifically, the study explored cultural-specific parenting practices that may help children navigate the American system of schooling.

Dr. Friend worked with 134 African American children and their mothers in a fifth grade public elementary school in a mid-sized southeastern city. He participated in home interviews and compiled academic achievement data from schools. Friend (2009) calculated the frequency of preparation for bias messages and the relationship of those messages to academic achievement. "The preparation for bias message is when a parent notifies the child of a potential situation where a biased judgment may be made, in order to help the child function" (Friend, 2009, p. 2). The study also measured pride development messages from parent to child. His results showed that "neither preparation for bias nor pride development was a significant predictor of academic achievement" (Friend, 2009, p. 44). In an associated conclusion, Friend (2009) found that male students of color report more discrimination than girls, and are more likely to be perceived as a threat than girls (p. 45). In comparison, Bell (2012) has also found that African American parents may find it necessary to "use culturally specific socialization practices to equip (their sons) with the needed competencies for survival in a school setting" (p. 6). In other words, parents of African American male students have a role to play in preparing their children, to be aware of and manage, any potential pros and cons that may occur as a result of attending school.

According to Rolland (2011) parental support plays a vital role in the academic achievement of African American male high school students. For example, Rolland (2011) found that "parents who stayed involved in their child's education by visiting the school, volunteering, and making sure needed supplies were accessible, motivated the adolescents to stay focused on

school tasks” (p. 18). African American males recognized the values parents placed on an education and duplicated the same values. Parents constantly reminded the African American males of their responsibility to get an education if they wanted to be successful in life. Roland (2011) found that although, many participants expressed “self-determination” (p. 18), and “they welcomed the interest their parents took in their education and the expectations they had for them. African American male participants believed parental involvement influenced their academic success” (p. 18). In other words, Parental involvement in the life of the black male can have a positive effect on helping them to successfully come through high school.

In another study regarding the achievement of African American boys, Drs. Howard & Reynolds (2008) looked for further knowledge into the role of African American parents. The study they conducted focused on middle class families since this had been an overlooked group in the literature. The scholars used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine and encourage parental involvement. Dr. Howard (2008) explains that critical race theory is used as “a paradigmatic lens to examine the schooling experiences” (p. 956), and that a race-based approach offers “the opportunity to challenge dominant ideology” (p. 956). Counter-storytelling was employed as a methodological tool “so that the parent’s voice can be a focus” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 80). Specifically, the authors were interested in which parents were able to “acquire cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986, as cited in Howard & Reynolds (2008), p. 82). This latter term cultural capital, “refers to the norms, codes, and values of a dominant society” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 82). While the researchers sought information on the parent’s role in decision-making at the school relative to their children, they did not find direct correlation of this aspect of parental involvement to academic achievement. In summary, Howard and Reynolds (2008) found that;

Their results were varied. There was wide variability in parental styles and advocacy roles. For the middle class families they worked with in this study, there were dynamics of economic upward mobility that remain in flux for African Americans. (p. 93)

Some families seemed more comfortable with advocacy for their children, while others did not want to “rock the boat” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 93). According to Howard & Reynolds (2008) some scholars noted that educational and school decisions were made for African American youth by school personnel and officials rather than parents. Washington (2012) also noted that the “lack of social capital in African American parents with lower incomes, affected their ability to communicate their concerns effectively to educators at the schools (p. 47). Social capital refers to the collective value of the networks that a person may have, particularly networks where preferential treatment or economic gain are present.

In 2007, Ronald Ferguson completed a study that was considered more controversial. His goal was to uncover parenting practices and academic achievement as well, but took perhaps a more critical look at African American culture. Although the study did not blame cultural differences generally, or parenting practices specifically, he took a demanding look at the achievement gaps. He has a strong sociological basis to his research and noted “evidence is clear that academic achievement gaps are among the causes and the consequences of income inequality” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 18). The results of Ferguson’s (2007) comparative study were that “the learning-at-home-disparity appears at all income levels of the African American families (compared to white families)” (p. 20). For example, in his study he found that “the number of children’s books kept in a home corresponds to the mother’s completion of school years” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 20). He also found that “the amount of reading done at home related to

academic achievement” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 20). Indicating that the academic achievement of the parents can impact how dedicated parents are to teaching their children at home.

The Huffington Post (2012) reported that in a study of 513 adults irrespective of ethnicity or gender aged 19 to 35, that the two reasons identified most often that affected student decisions to leave school were “absence of parental or educational support” and “becoming a parent”. These answers according to the Huffington Post (2012) were followed by: “missing too many days of schools, failing classes, followed by uninteresting classes”. The first category absence of parental support, according to the Huffington Post (2012) “had the highest number of responses”. In other words, a lack of parental support the main reason that the people of this study felt caused them to drop out from high school.

Another study focused on African American eighth graders at a middle school in North Long Beach California, and sought to identify potential student support factors. The aim with this study was to identify what supports are available to assist the boys with their educational achievement. The author aimed for results in the areas of parental involvement, parental expectations, and parental trust and support for sons and schools. Dr. Wood (2012) utilized a mixed methods approach featuring questionnaires and surveys to collect data. Thirty family pairs of a parent and an eighth grader were selected at random and completed an additional questionnaire about attitudes and behaviors related to home environment that impacts education Wood (2012) found that “children function at a higher level of academic achievement when there is trust from the parents to the school and to the child” (p. 4). In other words, when the parent openly displays trust to the school as well as to the child, this can have a positive affect on a student’s ability to be academically successful.

An aspect of child development and educational attainment that has received much attention is income. Family income plays a role, perhaps a major role in a child's life. O'Conner & Fernandez found "that family income status is a predictor of academic success" (as cited in Washington, 2012, p. 39). For African American children, income is very important, as "the majority live at or below the nationally recognized low income level" (Washington, 2012, p. 40). "The link to residing in at-risk neighborhoods becomes more obvious, when considering income, poverty status, living in single-parent homes, inadequate housing, and/or living in areas with people who are unemployed or under-employed" (Washington, 2012, p. 40).

School

This section of the literature review proceeds with an overview of current research in the field of academic achievement for African American males. As has been shown in the previous sections, the topic is quite broad, ranging from race, ethnicity, and poverty studies to sociology and critical race theory, gender studies and parenting practices. Although it would be difficult to provide an exhaustive study of issues related to school culture/climate, teacher characteristics, and role models for the United States, it is important to provide the context for the capstone project with an overview of studies. The following literature review will highlight studies such as disciplinary actions, school relationships, and teacher characteristics.

Rolland (2011) describes that "school climate consists of the attitudes, beliefs, values that underlie students' academic success", (p. 43) and noted that "school climate helps to shape the communication between and among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community" (p. 43). Within this view of school climate, the "continued expectation that diverse groups of students can be successful is essential" (Roland, 2011, p. 43) as it is, maintenance is

“conducive to academic productivity and is an important initiative toward improving student achievement” (Rolland, 2011, p. 43).

The roles of principals and educators have widened to include a “larger focus on teaching and learning, professional development, data-driven decision making, and accountability” (Washington, 2012, p. xi). While focus remains on student learning, instructional leadership could be defined as what leaders do in schools and districts to improve that learning.

Administrators “face an expectation to lead schools in a way to show great improvements rapidly” (Rolland, 2011, p. 13), with most likely fewer resources at their disposal. Leaders are expected to “motivate teachers, create a safe and inviting environment for learning, and encourage parent groups and business partners to become active participants in the school system” (Rolland, 2011, p. 13). While leading her study on student perceptions of contributing success, Rolland (2011) also highlighted that; “instructional leaders must function at a consistently high level, and in an environment that is constantly changing, and likely complex” (p. 13).

In summary, recent research by Jones (2011), Washington (2012), and Rolland (2011) shows that teacher-student relationships bring students into the learning process and strengthens their desire to learn. Washington (2012) found that some participants of the study “viewed educators as recognizing their achievements, caring about meeting their educational needs, believing in them and encouraging them to do their best” (p. 42). African American children in Rolland’s (2011) study had a positive relationship with their teachers. For example, they were encouraged by their teachers to succeed. In addition, the school principal in this study praised African American males and reminded them they were capable of achieving their goals. Students

reported here that “teachers were willing to help them because they put forth effort to complete their classroom tasks” (Rolland, 2011, p. 118).

As noted in earlier sections, factors that affect the dropout rate are varied across locations and individuals. Yet, as complex as these individual circumstances may be, for almost all young people, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a “drawn out process of disengagement” (Bell, 2012, p. 12). It is thought, that the related issue of attendance patterns are a clear and early sign of future dropout status. According to Bridgeland (2006), 59 to 65 percent of respondents missed class often the year before dropping out (p. 6). Students described

A pattern of refusing to wake up, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches; each absence made them less willing to go back. These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged. (Bridgeland, 2006, p. 6)

Student-teacher relationships have also been the subject of many studies. A comparison of two quantitative studies involving national surveys of African-American male student perception revealed “linear relationships between academic achievement and student-teacher relationships” (Toldson as cited in Jones, 2011, p. 12). The two surveys involving nearly 3,300 students were the: Health Behavior in School-age Children (HBSC), the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) and the Children and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS). Toldson explained that “significant findings attributed for differences between “F-C” students and “B-A” students when African-American male students perceived support from their teachers” (as cited in Jones 2011, p. 12). The following are examples from Jones (2011) of perceived teacher support from the youth are: “being treated with respect, teachers say things that make you feel good about yourself, and

people at school listen” (p. 31). In essence, the findings from both studies confirmed that high-achieving African-American male students experience encouraging relationships with their teachers.

Claude Steel, a Stanford University psychologist and professor hypothesized that “black students are responding to the fear of confirming lower expectations” (as cited in Lee, 2002, p. 1). In another study, Steel found “male students have said that they are discriminated against more often than others” (as cited in Lee, 2002, p. 1), which is an area that has deserved attention by scholars recently. Other researchers substantiate this, noting that African American boys are “punished more harshly through suspensions and expulsions than their peers” (Jones, 2011, p. 16). Jones (2011) advises that although school administrators “must be held responsible for maintaining a safe environment they must understand that exclusionary discipline sanctions create long-term devastating effects” (p. 16).

In a related area, according to Townsend (2000) teachers of a European-American background may perceive African-American males as threatening or dangerous which results in an overreaction to a simple act of insubordination. (as cited in, Washington 2012, p. 12). Washington (2012) states that “Often times, any overreaction from an adult may result in the student getting confrontational, further indicating violations of the school disciplinary code of conduct, in a viscous cycle” (p. 12).

Students who get into trouble frequently may feel marginalized and lose the motivation to conform to school norms, or reject them. Then, the loss of instructional time resulting from suspension negatively affects achievement in general and particularly for African-American males. Jones (2011) found that “students who are suspended or expelled are more likely than their peers to drop out of school altogether” (p. 12). Jones’ (2011) study analyzed the educational

records of 125 African American males from an urban school setting in Virginia who had not completed high school. The purpose of the study was to identify school factors that did not encourage these young adults to persist to graduate in the academic year of 2009-2010. Overall, Jones looked at the possible links between disciplinary sanctions, curriculum and programming, instructional experiences and school relationships.

Using qualitative methods to analyze survey data, Jones studied the former student's perceptions of teacher-student relationships. The study was less interested in larger societal issues and family relationships or strategies, since those were considered by the researcher to "be beyond the reach of school policy" (Jones, 2011, p. 2). Instead, the study "prioritized these in-school relationships, curriculum decisions and disciplinary actions" (Jones, 2011, p. 2). Jones (2011) documents "numerous and large-scale studies that demonstrate a greater proportion of school disciplinary actions are made towards African American youth" (pp. 13-14). At the same time, African American students are "less likely to be enrolled in advanced coursework and more likely to be recommended and reported as special education students" (Jones, 2011, p. 17), where they have less access, and exposure to the to the general education curriculum.

In addition to suspension or expulsion, Balfanz & Legters state "there are other early dropout warning signs for ninth grade students" (as cited in, Bridgeland, 2006, p. 6). Jones (2011) found that "ninth grade boys who attend school less than 70% of the time have at least a 75% chance of dropping out of school" (p. 12). Additionally, Balfanz & Legters found that "high schools with weak promoting power receive students from one or more low-performing middle grades schools" (as cited in, Bridgeland, 2007, p. 6). It follows then, that "failure to succeed in ninth grade was evidenced by weak reading comprehension and mathematics skills as measured by the eighth grade assessment" (Bridgeland, 2007, p. 6). Similarly, Jones (2011) found that

“only 9% of African-American male students scored at or above proficiency on the eighth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment in each school district she studied” (p. 28). When analyzing African American student proficiency, a Gabriel (2010) study reported on a “social divide in the educational system, despite the target of one blast of school reform after another” (p. A22). Reporting on the status of African American fourth-grade boys, Gabriel (2010) wrote that “only 12% are proficient in reading, compared to 38% of white boys” (p. A22). The data was from the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress, and poverty alone could not explain the results. As mentioned previously in other research, the study noted that “African American boys fell behind from their earliest years in school” (Gabriel, 2010, p. A22). Dr. Ronald Ferguson was interviewed by Gabriel (2010) to help the public understand this discrepancy of African American boys reading skills, in relationship to their peers among whites. Ferguson, Director of the Achievement Institute at Harvard University, described “social and historical forces...in order to address those, we have to be able to have conversations that people are not willing to have” (as cited in Gabriel, 2010, p. A22). Gabriel (2010) explained that Ferguson was referring to “childhood parenting practices, such as the amount of time we talk to children, how we talk to them, and how discipline is enforced” (p. A22). While Ferguson noted that really good teaching is essential to prevent dropping out, in these short statements Dr. Ferguson looks to “not only the basic historical facts, but also to contemporary culture to remedy this problem of poor graduation rates” (as cited in Gabriel, 2010, p. A22). Perhaps further examination and understanding as to the state that African American males may be in when entering high school, will help to curb drop out disparities.

The Education Trust, a nonprofit organization, focuses on access to equitable funding and teacher quality for poor and students of color. Neild & Farley-Ripple summarized an Education

Trust study on teacher quality, which revealed that “high-poverty and high-minority schools are likely to employ inexperienced teachers and those who are not highly qualified” (as cited in Jones, 2011, p. 29). Jones (2011) revealed similar findings in a study of a “high-poverty urban district comprised of an 85% minority student population. Specifically, inexperienced teachers and those who were not highly qualified staffed the neediest schools” (p. 29).

Teacher characteristics have been studied extensively as well, in order to investigate their potential impact on student learning and behavior. Bell (2012) found that although “some interventions have focused on teacher training; many scholars have found teacher effectiveness is not a cure all for larger issues that affect student engagement” (p. 6). Numerous influential studies have focused on this area and a brief summary of teacher characteristics follows.

To start with, effective teachers adapt to the learning styles of a variety of students in an effort to encourage student academic growth. Bell (2006) summarizes that effective teachers have at least the five following characteristics:

- (a) high expectations of all students
- (b) contribute to positive academic and social outcomes
- (c) use diverse resources
- (d) contribute to the development of classrooms
- (e) collaborate with others (Adapted from Joe, Bell, and Little 2008, as cited in Bell 2012, p. 6)

In summary, students are more likely to stay in school when social relations with teachers and administrators are positive. Like so many students, academic achievement of African

American high school males increases with nurturing, intelligent teachers, strong administrative leadership, and strong bonds between parents, school, and community.

Self

In this fourth cluster of possible factors that may lead to a high proportion of African American males who do not complete high school, the following areas were identified as being critical to understanding student decision-making: self-concept, racial perception of self, peer acceptance, values, and identity. While each of these subtopics could be the subject of their own capstone project, within the literature review I will highlight studies which relate to the research question: *Why do African American males drop out of high school?*

“The relatively lower graduation and higher dropout rates of African American males, can be traced and attributed to their early experiences” (Rolland, 2011, p. 16). While they may begin school with numerous literacy experiences from home and church it has been documented in the literature that African American male students are “failing in their academic endeavors and becoming disconnected from mainstream society in elementary school” (Rolland, 2011, p. 16). In these studies, evidence suggested that African American males are disconnected with school as early as kindergarten and continue to be disconnected as they progress through school.

The low academic success of so many African American children has been a concern as the number of minority children in school has increased while their academic performance has decreased. As Dr. Bell (2006) explains, “The school can be considered the place where children begin to develop their identity, African American males develop an identity of who they are, what they are to do, and how they are perceived by others” (p. 6). Children’s self-concepts are

formed by their experiences in not only school but with the church, family, community, media, and it is this development that relates to academic achievement.

According to an Edward (2009) study, he focused on the impact of self-esteem and its relationship to academic achievement. Within a charter school setting, Bell (2009) provided 93 students with a pretest and posttest. A control group design was implemented. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory and the School Perception Questionnaire were both used as pre-test measures. The design of the study was for the control group to have no intervention between pre and post testing, while the experimental group was taught the Start Something Curriculum, which is a character education program. The grade point averages were also recorded before beginning the study. "Post testing showed that there were no differences in reported self-esteem of youth, and no differences between the control groups and experimental groups on the post tests" (Bell, 2009, p. 26). This shows that a short curriculum may not, and in this case, did not alter self-esteem, Bell (2009) concluded that "self-esteem may not be directly affected in a school setting through curriculum" (p. 26).

West (2013) grouped his study results from grades six through eight middle schoolers into themes related to sense of self and/or place in the world. His themes attempted to study the gaps in academic achievement. The study results noted by Dr. West (2013) include "a lack of academic stability exemplified by students moving often during their formative years, a lack of enough guidance from adults relative to school progression, and/ or failing one or more grades" (p. 9).

In addition, older adolescents in West's study spoke of "feelings of abandonment or loss" (West, 2013, p. 9) and many noted growing up without a parent, and had "grief about dropping out of school" (West, 2013, p. 9). West (2013) insists that a need remains to form bonds with

teacher(s), and that these students needed to “increase feelings of connectedness to school and to people” (p. 9). The former students he interviewed said teachers did not have high enough expectations, and that learning was not challenging and “was not related to their lives” (West, 2013, p. 9). The general message West (2013) received was that students do not feel that school is connected to their futures. Overall, in addition to the data he amassed, West provides an example of giving a voice to the adolescents and personalizing the data as well.

Washington’s (2012) study focused on middle schoolers with learning disabilities. Utilizing a critical race theory framework, participant interviews, focus groups and documentary evidence, Dr. Washington (2012) ascertained that a student’s “self-perception and sense of self are crucial aspects of educational relevance” (p. 21). She wrote that “because of the influence of the inclusion movement in general education settings, it is important to examine social and environmental aspects which may influence African American males’ success” (Washington, 2012, p. 21). More relevant to this capstone project, the Washington study helped to identify that the students’ view of education should be heard.

Dr. Washington (2012) focused on how the students’ perceive “the significance, relevance, and benefits of attaining an education” (p. 19). Considering the general education population, Washington summarizes that African American’s “self-perceptions have been shaped or altered by historical oppressive events and that racial experiences...have resulted in negative self-perceptions that were often demonstrated by low academic performance or inappropriate behavioral skills (Washington, 2012, p. 47). In effect, she concluded that such experiences undermine adolescent well-being as well as performance, and had the “consequence of lowering their sense of control” (Washington, 2012, p. 47).

Washington (2012) states It seems that “considerable effort is made in order to have children fit into the school setting instead of finding ways for the school to adapt to the culture of the students” (p. 48). However, some academics feel the responsibility of educators in school systems and policy makers in the business and government sectors “should be to understand factors affecting academic success for African American male adolescents and to reduce the rate at which this population of learners drops out of school” (Rolland, 2011, p. 20). According to United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), African American males have lower educational attainment levels, and are more highly unemployed than males of other racial/ethnic groups. Rolland (2011) explains that perhaps the frustration, under achievement and failures of this population often “reflect the contemporary educational reality for thousands of African American male youths” (p. 20). Rolland (2011) explains that African American males from early childhood through high school tend to experience significant problems related to isolation in schools of America. The “consequences of this isolation are major limitations on socioeconomic mobility, ultimately leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for massive numbers of young African American men” (Rolland, 2011, p. 20). Rolland (2011) supports the theory that there is a “high correlation between African American males’ experiences at school, and their economic conditions during adulthood” (pp. 20-21). Rolland offers unique perspective as to some reasons that influence African American males leaving high school.

Conclusion

Although many of the specific studies had different methods or research questions, it seems that there are a number of interventions and strategies that can be employed at school and by families to improve the rate of African American males graduating. In the course of

conducting the literature review, it became clear that numerous strategies may be employed in order to target the issue of a high rate of high school dropouts.

According to Bell (2012) there “needs to be increased options for different schools for different students” (p. 2). Bell encourages districts to “develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom with real life experiences and with work” (Bell, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, he states “smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, and alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out” (Bell, 2012, p. 2) are research-based answers to the issue. Bell is an advocate of keeping expectations on students high. He explains “Teachers should have high expectations for their students and try different approaches to motivate them to learn” (Bell, 2012, p. 2). In addition to teachers having high expectations, “parent engagement strategies and individualized graduation plans should be implemented” (Bell, 2012, p. 12).

From the literature that was surveyed for this project, it seems that schools should be at a basic level, inviting environments where all students feel connected and safe. African-American male students who drop out of school are more likely to be suspended from school and less likely to be involved in extracurricular clubs and activities. Many extracurricular clubs and activities have rules that terminate membership if the student is suspended; further disconnecting the suspended youth from school. African-American male students who are not experiencing academic success need to be connected and anchored at school. A club, an adult mentor or advocate could be that hook. Similarly, peers can also serve as the hook that keeps students in school. However, African-American male students who are at risk for dropping out are unlikely to be associated with peers who are successful students. Therefore, “engaging the African-American male student in school extracurricular activities, is essential to provide positive peer

interaction” (Bell, 2012, p. 12). Aside from the school counselor, adult mentors and advocates can be teachers, coaches, volunteers and members from community partners.

A wider view should be taken and it is important to refocus attention from high school to earlier grades. Of the students leaving high school without graduating, a high proportion is leaving during ninth grade. “African American males are falling behind often and early” (Wood, 2012, p. 4), so it should be a priority to reduce social promotions in the middle school years especially. Further research into the antecedents to 9th grade dropout rate could be essential in order to study this problem further.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

After an introductory section, the following will be discussed: Research question, Research design, Participants, Instruments/Data collection, Limits and Summary. It is important here that the rationale and methods for the investigation will be explained clearly. This section is a description of how to answer the research question and what I will do as far as procedure.

Introduction

Few studies have documented African American male students' perception of their school history academic success, or lack thereof. The perceptions of African American students can be critical in helping educators further understand, why African American male students continue to be underachievers in academics. School leaders must be aware of how culture and climate in schools, cultural diversity, parental involvement, poor curriculum, role of principal, students' relationship with teachers, and changing demographics impact the success of African American male students. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore African American male students' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic successes and failures.

Research Question

Why are African American males dropping out of high school?

Research Design

This capstone project will investigate the impact of social and racial variables to these students' schooling experiences. A former African American male urban high school student will be interviewed approximately (1-3 hours), and asked to describe his academic situation. The participant will be asked nine pre-planned questions and where fit, additional probing questions will be asked in order to obtain further clarity on a subject. The questions will be aimed at

gaining the participants perspective on the factors that contributed to his academic success or lack thereof, and what solutions and challenges he perceives as necessary for African American males to achieve academic success. The purpose of this study is to understand why African American males are dropping out of high school. The project will be completed as qualitative research, Creswell (2009) explains that “the qualitative inquirers use theory in their studies in several ways, . . . it is used as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes and it may be complete with variables, constructs, and hypotheses” (p. 61). This type of research is generally concerned with the interpretation of human behaviors, relying on the people that have experienced those behaviors.

Participants

A participant consent form will be used before the interview and for the recording of the interview. The participants will be an African American male (age18-30) who has dropped out of high school and did not go on to acquire a high school equivalency.

Instruments and Data Collection

Interview questions will be taken from an interview structure of Dr. West (2013) of Ursuline College.

- Tell me about yourself. What are your interest and hobbies?
- Please let me know of your early childhood memories of school?
- What do you remember about your middle school years?
- How did this compare to high school?
- Tell me about your support system regarding school.
- Are there teachers or events that you remember as very negative or very positive?
- What memories do you think made the greatest difference in your life?
- What were your priorities when you left school?
- Do you think your school experience is typical?

(pp. 3-4)

Research Methods/Procedure:

The researcher will transcribe the audio-taped interviews upon completion, using a password protected personal computer.

The following steps will be used to analyze the data for this study:

1. Organize data by using a computer database program, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking.

Data will be broken into smaller units of individual words, key phrases, sentences, similarities and differences.

2. Listen to the entire data set several times to identify categories and subcategories for interpretation of themes.

3. Assign general descriptions to the themes to classify information. Classifying pertains to taking the text or qualitative information apart, looking for categories, themes, or dimensions of information.

4. Integrate, summarize and present significant statements and themes in order to aid in the understanding of what is happening and draw justified conclusions.

Limitations

Since this research involves a select group of African American male students who had previously attended an urban high school, no generalizations can be made to all African American male students at all high schools. In addition, the sample size that I am using is relatively small. I will be interviewing one African American male aged between (18-30) who has dropped out of high school.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

The information in this chapter will show the interviewees responses to the interview questions based on the research question. The research question for this study was: Why are African American males dropping out of high school? The interview portion of this study was conducted with an African American male whose actual name will not be revealed, the interviewee will from here on be referred to by the pseudonym of Tim. Tim was a young man of twenty nine years old, from the local Twin Cities community in Minnesota who had dropped out of high school in the ninth grade. Data collection was made in the form of a two hour recorded interview with consent. The study was an intensive open-ended interview with nine preplanned questions (see Appendix B), accompanied by a number of probing questions and statements where I saw fit to have the interviewee expand on his answers. The data was then transcribed and a transcript of that interview is included in this report, (see appendix C). The purpose of this case study was to gain first hand insight of an African American male who has dropped out of high school.

Interview

Researcher: Tell me about yourself. What are your interest and your hobbies?

Tim: Well I grew up right here in the twin cities area; I lived most of my life in Saint Paul. I like sports, hanging out with friends and family, watching movies and being productive.

Researcher: Please let me know of your early childhood memories of school?

Tim: Ummm, lets see. I loved school when I was young. I can remember that on the night before the first day of school, I used to put on my new clothes and sleep sitting up on the sofa!

HAHAHA

Researcher: HAHAHA I used to do that same thing!

Tim: Really! HAHHAHA, yea I know a few people that used to do that. Maybe it was something popular amongst young kids at that time.

Researcher: Yea maybe you are right, because I know a bunch of people who used to do that as well.

Tim: Yea, those were some of my happiest moments, waiting at the bus stop, and seeing other kids come to the bus stop and getting to know them. I was excited about all that, and getting to know which classroom is mine, which desk is mine, who is my teacher, and who are all my classmates. I used to just be really excited about all that, and I would do everything that the teacher would ask me to do.

Researcher: Well Tim, what I gather from what you're saying is it looks as though your earliest memories of school, are memories of happiness and excitement. Would it be fair to say at this point of your academic career you loved school?

Tim: No doubt, I definitely loved school in my elementary days. You know I never really had a good relationship with my mother as far back as I can remember, and very few words were ever really spoken in my house from my parents. So in retrospect I guess I came to see school as the place of love, and not my house. In fact now that I think about it, I didn't even expect much at all from my parents because I felt as though all my human needs were satisfied from school up until that point. Of course I didn't think about my human needs and all that as a child, I just felt extremely happy and content. However now I understand that happiness I felt was a result of my relationship with my school teachers, administrators, classmates, and friends.

Researcher: Tim if you don't mind, you said a few things that I thought were interesting and I would like you to elaborate on. You spoke about not having a good relationship with your

mother, and not expecting much from your parents. In the same breath you were saying that your school satisfied your human needs.

Tim: Well typically the mother is understood to be the parent who establishes and takes care of the emotional needs of the child. However in my case for whatever reason my mother up till that point played no significant role in my life. I simply remember her as a figure that was there. In addition to that she was not a very loving, kind, or sensitive woman, she was rather rigid, and unrefined. My father, I have little to no memory of, although he was present in the home he never said much. As far as my school satisfying my emotional needs, I looked up to my teachers, and I respected and even loved them more than my parents. Of course I realize that more so now than I did as a child. Also I got the sense that the love and affection I had for my teachers was reciprocated. As a result of that reciprocated love from my teachers, I just came to see my parents as almost nonexistent. They didn't give much and I didn't expect much, so as a result our relationship was ok at that point. Later on in life as I would begin to expect more from my parents, and when they wouldn't deliver on those expectations I began to have problems with them. I now realize that the emotional disruption I would experience due to the lies and the disappointments I would experience from my parents, later on served as the foundation for my teenage problems.

Researcher: It sounds like you have really developed a lot of insight about yourself and the things you went through as a youth, and I admire your ability to look back at your life with such clarity and insight. Tell me, what do you remember about your middle school years?

Tim: When I went to middle school we had the option of stay in elementary and completing the sixth grade and then going to middle school for the seventh grade, or going to middle school in the sixth grade. I choose to go to middle school in the sixth grade. It's at this point that things

begin to go bad for me. Apparently my clothing wasn't up with the trends of the times, so people began to make fun of me for what I was wearing. At this point now in sixth grade, I began to care more about keeping myself out of the harms of being teased or bothered. I still did my work, but my feelings were vastly different from elementary school. I began to feel pressure, anxiety, and fear about going to school. I didn't want to be made fun of so truancy became an issue, because if I felt I didn't have clothes I wouldn't go to school. By the time I reached eighth grade I was in the criminal justice system because of my trancies. In addition to that my grades had fallen significantly, and I was barely hanging on with school.

Researcher: And how does this compare to high school?

Tim: High school for me was the beginning of the end so to speak. By the time I came to my freshmen year of high school, I had begun to hang out with the wrong crowd so to speak. I completely lost interest in my academics, and really school in general. I completely fell out with my parents and I would rarely go home. I began to hang out with friends that I had made from school, and we all hated home and school. We shared a genuine disconnect from school and from our parents, and it seemed society in general.

Researcher: Tell me about your support system regarding school.

Tim: That's easy, I didn't have one. Not a practical one at least. Of course my parents would upon occasion say go to school, because they got a letter in the mail that they may have some problem if I don't go to school. There were some people who would try to help me at my school, school counselors or teachers who would advise me. However I felt that because of the fact that they were of a different ethnic group, mostly white. I felt they couldn't really relate to my situation, so I just kinda shut down and didn't want to hear anything from any one. I became like a rebellious teen you know. Actually now that I think about it, I regret how I responded to the

white teachers and school counselors who tried to help me. At that age I assumed that because the teachers and counselors were white, that meant they could not relate to my problems of having parent issues, or being teased. I also assumed all whites came from families that were Brady bunch like. Of course now I realize how silly of an assumption that was, and I can recognize how distorted my thinking was due to the misplaced feelings I was having about my poor relationship with my parents. I kinda felt like if my parents don't genuinely care about me, then how can anyone else, especially someone of European descent? I just couldn't bring myself to believe that if ones parents don't care about them, other non relatives could. Therefore I could say that people at my school attempted to support me when they saw me struggling. However I wasn't ready to receive any help as I wasn't able to manage the rejection I felt from my parents, and as a result I became self destructive.

Researcher: I really admire your ability to articulate so well what you where feeling and thinking in those moments with such poignant description. I can remember experiencing similar kinds of confusions when I was a teenager. A feeling of no one understands me, and just being confused and making poor choices. Are their teachers or events that you remember as very negative or very positive?

Tim: I can remember all my teachers from kindergarten through fourth grade as being very loving and amazing people. Especially my second grade teacher, I had two teachers in second grade. One man and one woman, and the woman had to leave before the year ended. I actually cried because she had to leave. I am grateful for the care and attention I received from all my teachers kindergarten through fourth grade, they were truly some of the best people I've ever meet in my life. When I reached high school, I can remember a teacher who said he doesn't care rather we the students come to school or not. He will be paid no matter if we show up or not, and

that statement of his rubbed me in the wrong direction. I wasn't prepared to hear such a statement from my teacher, and it helped to push me out the door of high school.

Researcher: What memories do you think made the greatest difference in your life?

Tim: I believe my elementary school experience were some of the happiest memories of my life until now. However with in my elementary experience, I believe my second grade year made the biggest difference in my life.

Researcher: So at what point exactly do you think you decided to drop out?

Tim: Well, it wasn't like I made a conscious decision to just drop out. I had missed so many days, and so many assignments. I felt heavy in my head from the burden of thinking about all the missed work that I would have to make up. In addition to that I had household problems, I also felt like I couldn't keep up with the demands of clothing and pop culture in order not to be bullied or teased. So gradually I just left school. After so many days went by of not going I told myself I can't go back, it would be impossible to do all what I would need to in order to pass my courses. I also just felt overwhelmed at that particular point in my life. I guess I was trying to just let some things go, so I didn't feel so burdened or overwhelmed.

Researcher: What were your priorities when you left school?

Tim: To be honest I didn't have any, and therein lays the problem. I suppose if I would have had priorities, I would not have dropped out of school. After dropping out in the ninth grade I would go on to engage in criminal activity. I started selling and using drugs, and breaking into peoples' homes, and stealing from stores. This would go on for a number of years until I would eventually become incarcerated.

Researcher: Wow! So you go from a relatively good kid who loves school, to hating school dropping out and going on to a life of crime. Do you think your school experience is typical?

Tim: You know man I don't profess to know anything about the average experience of the black male in America. But what I can say is that for most black men that I know and that I have ran into, and from what they have told me of black males that they have known or have meet. I would say the experience was pretty typical of my time. That is due to peer pressure, and or problems at home the student begins to gradually disconnect from the school system. I've heard about school systems in other parts of the country, and I actually have no bad feelings against the system that we have here in the Twin Cities. In fact I'm grateful for my having grown up and went to school in this community. When I hear stories about other school systems throughout the country, I feel extremely grateful to have grown up and attended school here in the Twin Cities. I now see that once I began to experience hurt, disappointment, and rejection form my parents, and I wasn't able to handle those feelings in a healthy way. That is where my problems as a person really began to come in, and because of my good relationship with my teachers in school I was actually saved from such feelings for years, because I was so into school it was almost as if my parents didn't even exist.

Results

It's clear that Tim grew up in a home environment that was not conducive to his academic success. Tim spoke well of his earliest memories of school, and demonstrated a sense of happiness and well being when talking about his earliest school memories. In fact we shared quite a laugh together during the interview, when the subject of his earliest school moments came up. I think it was an important note that in his experience, he had a loving relationship with his teachers during his early elementary years. So much so that he began to see them as meaning more to him than his parents. He explained that he had little to no expectations from his parents, and that he didn't expect any love care or support from them. Tim explained that only later in his

life did he begin to realize that he had dysfunctional parents, and was living in a broken home. In addition to this realization, when Tim came into his later middle school and early high school years when he began to experience peer pressure. His classmates would begin to target him and make fun of him for what he would wear to school. It seemed to me that the pressure from Tim's classmates coupled with the problems he was having in his home, were key factors that lead to his eventual dropping out. If I had to trace it down to one factor I would say that Tim's household problems appeared to be a major factor, and they bleed out into other areas of his life, making it virtually impossible for him to function in his high school environment. The findings of this study support the complexity of the issue. There are many areas that need to be further explored, as further research into African-American male students who are not successful in the current school climate must be addressed.

Summary

I do think that there are a number of common themes that existed in Tim's life, which would resonate with a number of African American males who have dropped out of high school. As I have stated earlier I am an African American male who has dropped out of high school, and I can relate to a number of experiences that Tim had growing up. Likewise I know that a number of my peers could relate to some of his experiences as well. I have come to learn that in answering the question; why do African American males drop out of high school? One should not expect a single answer but rather a multitude of answers, given the level of complexity involved with each human beings life.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This capstone study explored factors that African American male students perceived as challenges to their academic success, as well as explored some solutions students believed to be necessary for improving academic success. The research question guiding this study was: Why do African Americans males drop out of high school? My objective was to highlight and focus on reasons that were clearly identified in the literature review and through my case study. In hopes to develop a list of factors by which people who are working currently, or may come to work with at risk drop outs, may develop some preemptive measures, designed to discourage the failure of African American male youth. While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly supports that can be provided that would improve students' chances of staying in school.

Summary of Findings

Bell (2012) stated that for almost all young people dropping out of school is not a sudden act, but a drawn out process of disengagement (p. 12). Tim explained that his disengagement began to happen in his middle school years, primarily as a result of peer pressure about what clothing he was wearing. Bell (2012) stated that engaging the African-American male student in school extracurricular activities, is essential to provide positive peer interaction (p. 12). Tim suffered from being teased by his peers in school because he wasn't dressing in a certain way. Tim stated "by the time I came to my freshmen year of high school... I had completely fell out with my parents and I would rarely go home." Rolland (2011) found that parental support plays a vital role in the academic achievement of African American male high school students. (p. 18). Tim's negative relationship with his parents was a key issue that helped to encourage his eventual

dropout. Tim stated “I began to feel pressure anxiety and fear about going to school” this was as a result of him not having the in fashion clothes of the time to wear to school. Therefore Tim would begin to miss school days because he did not want to be teased. This would later lead to Tim being entered into the criminal justice system as a result of being truant. Lofstrom (2007) poverty is a key contributor and risk factor towards dropout rates (p. 2). Tim not having popular clothes, because he couldn’t afford them lead to his avoiding school, due to fear of being made fun of. He would avoid coming to school for days at a time. Tim explained

I felt heavy in my head from the burden of thinking about all the missed work that I would have to make up. In addition to that I had household problems, I also felt like I couldn’t keep up with the demands of clothing and pop culture in order not to be bullied or teased. So gradually I just left school. After so many days went by of not going I told myself I can’t go back, it would be impossible to do all what I would need to in order to pass my courses. I also just felt overwhelmed at that particular point in my life. I guess I was trying to just let some things go, so I didn’t feel so burdened or overwhelmed.

Bell (2102) described dropping out of high school as not a sudden being a sudden act, but a “drawn out process of disengagement” (p. 12) Tim certainly went through a period of being drawn out and disengaged from school, as a result of a problems he experienced related to: school, family, environment/community, and self. Bridgeland (2006) found that students prior to dropping out would develop “a pattern of refusing to wake up, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches; each absence made them less willing to go back (p. 6). Tim stated that “I felt heavy in my head from the burden of thinking about all the missed work that I would have to make up”. This is a clear Indication that as each absence passed by for Tim; it made him less willing to go back to school. Wright (2011) stated that “youth are especially vulnerable to their environments,

principally because of their real and perceived inability to impact the world around them.” (p. 2) Tim no doubt had a number of environmental factors be it at school or at home, that slowly but surely lead to his dropout, as a result of becoming overwhelmed by his situation. Bell (2006) stated “The school can be considered the place where children begin to develop their identity, and African American males develop an identity of who they are, what they are to do, and how they are perceived by others.” (p. 6) Tim explained that early on he enjoyed school, and that it wasn’t until he began to experience being bullied and teased at school, did he begin to have problems associated with school. The negative experience that Tim had with his peers at school was certainly a factor that contributed to his dropping out from school. Washington (2012) found “that it appears as though the lack of higher graduation rates is a lifespan issue, and not isolated to a high school or late adolescent issue” (p. 2). Tim most certainly did not decide to just up and dropout from school one day, as a result of entering high school. There was no doubt a build up process to Tim’s eventual dropping out of high school.

Discoveries

Parental involvement, caring and concerned teachers no doubt play a role in students’ academic achievement. However, I am of the view that parental involvement is one of the most important aspects to the academic success of students, as parents remain the basic institution through which children learn about the world, who they are, and where they fit into society, as well as what kinds of futures they are likely to experience. Bell (2009) stated “parental academic involvement that includes frequent school contacts, high expectations for postsecondary education, firm and supportive parenting skills, leads to high educational outcomes for the African American male child” (p. 6). Parental involvement in a child’s education impacts academic achievement through a number of ways, some of which could include; higher grades,

higher test scores, course credits earned, attendance, school readiness, and behavior. Students with involved parents, regardless of background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, take advanced courses, be promoted, and have better attendance rates.

The stories, insights, and reflections from this case study reveal the importance of the students' voice in the discussion, about what must be done to improve high school graduation rates and to prepare struggling students for successful futures. Washington (2012) stated that "a student's self-perception is a crucial aspect of educational relevance" (p. 21). The need for better understanding of social and environmental components to academic success in the context of self-perception continues to be relevant. Washington (2012) found that "reflective data, perhaps from students who have recently graduated, are perhaps an untapped resource for uncovering further improvements to the nation's schools" (p. 22). The adolescent and teen years are often filled with struggle as students want to find their place in the world. Schools and students alike are facing an increase of challenges in order to meet demands. Social and environmental issues impact students as well as their school performance and how their self-concept is developing.

The use of an interview in this capstone project has offered unique insight into obtaining an understanding of why African American males are not graduating high school. Rather or not young black male students leave high school due to peer pressure, negative experiences of disciplinary action, problems at home, or academic reasons. "There is more to educating African American males than academics" (Bell, 2012, p. 14). If what Bell says is true, then there are a number of things that can be brought into question. A few questions that come to mind for me are: is it the schools moral responsibility to essentially become a parent, or full spectrum of human needs provider for troubled students? Is that the model that public schools in our country are currently running on? To what degree should failed parents be culpable for their children's

academic failures? Depending on one's moral or political view the answers to these questions could vary. I recommend that further research into the preceding questions, as well as research taking a look at the fundamental nature of our public school system be conducted. For if there is to be any serious conversation about improving the dropout rate of African American males, I believe factors outside of academics must be investigated and included in any potential solution.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it contributes to the body of research on reasons that can cause African American males to drop out of high school. It identifies how an African American male's household relationships can affect their school performance. It identifies how an African American male can describe his school history and identify which factors played a role with regards to his eventual dropping out of high school.

Findings from this study can provide educational administrators, as well as leadership preparation programs, the opportunity to collaborate on how to work with African American males students. This research can also affect the larger community of students at large, because a high schools success is contingent upon all students in the school doing well. In addition, this research provides an opportunity to gather first-hand knowledge, data, and understanding from an African American male student about his perceptions of academic success; each of which will enable the researcher, personally, to be more effective as an educator in the future.

Limitations

This study only contains the interview from the perspective of one African American male who has dropped out of high school. When mentioning an entire ethnic group in reference to the perspective of one, this no doubt poses a significant limitation. I would recommend that in

future studies seeking first hand perspective of an African American male who has dropped out of high school, that a larger sample size be taken.

Summary

This study sought to understand African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic successes and or failures. The researcher gathered information by interviewing students and collecting their demographic profile data. This qualitative research method enabled the researcher to learn directly from students what factors African American male students associated with academic success as well as challenges to academic success and solutions for achieving academic success. The social and academic challenges confronting African American males' ability to succeed in the school setting must be addressed. There is strong indication that educators need to be aware of the challenges that these students face. Particularly educators and administrators who work in an urban setting, through this awareness communities can work together to formulate a prescription of how best to support academic development among African American males.

Although the literature review highlighted many factors thought to lead to academic success among African American male students. There were few examples that featured former African American male students as participants with perceptions and knowledge to offer. The research literature related to the first hand perceptions of African American male academic achievement in my view is less than optimal. Therefore, I recommend that future research that can possibly provide educators and school leaders with information on how best to support the academic development of African American male students, be designed to encompass the view point of former students who have dropped out. Furthermore, findings from this study can fuel

future research questions that may lead to a reversal of the troubling statistics of low-achieving African American male students, and begin a new trend of fostering a generation of high achievers among the African American male population of students.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Letter

Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

August 4, 2015

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student working on an advanced degree in education at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct an interview with an African American male who has dropped out of high school. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation. This research is public scholarship the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository and that it may be published or used in other ways.

The topic of my master's capstone (thesis) is Why are African American Males Dropping out of High School? I plan to interview an African American male who has dropped out of high school and learn from experiences and perspectives that he has to offer. The interview will be recorded and will not exceed 3 hours in length. The planned interview questions will be provided ahead of time; there will be additional unplanned questions provided when more information on a topic or discussion is needed. After completing the capstone, I will summarize the findings in a report to be distributed to the interview participant.

There is little to no risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will be confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms for schools and participants will be used. The interviews will be conducted at a place and time that are convenient for you. The interview recordings will be destroyed after completion of my study.

Participation in the interview is voluntary, and, at any time, you may decline to be interviewed or to have your interview content deleted from the capstone without negative consequences.

I have received approval from the School of Education at Hamline University to conduct this study. The capstone will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. My results might be included in an article in a professional journal or a session at a professional conference. In all cases, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential.

If you agree to participate, keep this page. Fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on page two and return it to me by mail or copy the form in an email to me no later than _____. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Michael Knight
3139 McKnight Rd.
St. Paul MN, 55119

651-325-5334 mknight02@hamline.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Keep this full page for your records.

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing an African American male who has dropped out of high school. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

Signature

Date

Appendix B

Pre-Planned Interview Questions

Appendix B: Pre-planned Interview Questions

Pre planned Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself. What are your interest and hobbies?
- Please let me know of your early childhood memories of school?
- What do you remember about your middle school years?
- How did this compare to high school?
- Tell me about your support system regarding school.
- Are their teachers or events that you remember as very negative or very positive?
- What memories do you think made the greatest difference in your life?
- What were your priorities when you left school?
- Do you think your school experience is typical?

Appendix C

Interview of Tim

Appendix C: Interview with Tim

Researcher: Tell me about yourself. What are your interest and your hobbies?

Tim: Well I grew up right here in the twin cities area; I lived most of my life in Saint Paul. I like sports, hanging out with friends and family, watching movies and being productive.

Researcher: Please let me know of your early childhood memories of school?

Tim: Ummm, lets see. I loved school when I was young. I can remember that on the night before the first day of school, I used to put on my new clothes and sleep sitting up on the sofa!
HAHAHA

Researcher: HAHAHA I used to do that same thing!

Tim: Really! HAHAHA, yea I know a few people that used to do that. Maybe it was something popular amongst young kids at that time.

Researcher: Yea maybe you are right, because I know a bunch of people who used to do that as well.

Tim: Yea, those were some of my happiest moments, waiting at the bus stop, and seeing other kids come to the bus stop and getting to know them. I was excited about all that, and getting to know which classroom is mine, which desk is mine, who is my teacher, and who are all my classmates. I used to just be really excited about all that, and I would do everything that the teacher would ask me to do.

Researcher: Well Tim, what I gather from what you're saying is it looks as though your earliest memories of school, are memories of happiness and excitement. Would it be fair to say at this point of your academic career you loved school?

Tim: No doubt, I definitely loved school in my elementary days. You know I never really had a good relationship with my mother as far back as I can remember, and very few words were ever really spoken in my house from my parents. So in retrospect I guess I came to see school as the place of love, and not my house. In fact now that I think about it, I didn't even expect much at all from my parents because I felt as though all my human needs were satisfied from school up until that point. Of course I didn't think about my human needs and all that as a child, I just felt extremely happy and content. However now I understand that happiness I felt was a result of my relationship with my school teachers, administrators, classmates, and friends.

Researcher: Tim if you don't mind, you said a few things that I thought were interesting and I would like you to elaborate on. You spoke about not having a good relationship with your mother, and not expecting much from your parents. In the same breath you were saying that your school satisfied your human needs.

Tim: Well typically the mother is understood to be the parent who establishes and takes care of the emotional needs of the child. However in my case for whatever reason my mother up till that point played no significant role in my life. I simply remember her as a figure that was there. In addition to that she was not a very loving, kind, or sensitive woman, she was rather rigid, and unrefined. My father, I have little to no memory of, although he was present in the home he never said much. As far as my school satisfying my emotional needs, I looked up to my teachers, and I respected and even loved them more than my parents. Of course I realize that more so now than I did as a child. Also I got the sense that the love and affection I had for my teachers was reciprocated. As a result of that reciprocated love from my teachers, I just came to see my parents as almost nonexistent. They didn't give much and I didn't expect much, so as a result our relationship was ok at that point. Later on in life as I would begin to expect more from my

parents, and when they wouldn't deliver on those expectations I began to have problems with them. I now realize that the emotional disruption I would experience due to the lies and the disappointments I would experience from my parents, later on served as the foundation for my teenage problems.

Researcher: It sounds like you have really developed a lot of insight about yourself and the things you went through as a youth, and I admire your ability to look back at your life with such clarity and insight. Tell me, what do you remember about your middle school years?

Tim: When I went to middle school we had the option of stay in elementary and completing the sixth grade and then going to middle school for the seventh grade, or going to middle school in the sixth grade. I choose to go to middle school in the sixth grade. It's at this point that things begin to go bad for me. Apparently my clothing wasn't up with the trends of the times, so people began to make fun of me for what I was wearing. At this point now in sixth grade, I began to care more about keeping myself out of the harms of being teased or bothered. I still did my work, but my feelings were vastly different from elementary school. I began to feel pressure, anxiety, and fear about going to school. I didn't want to be made fun of so truancy became an issue, because if I felt I didn't have clothes I wouldn't go to school. By the time I reached eighth grade I was in the criminal justice system because of my trancies. In addition to that my grades had fallen significantly, and I was barely hanging on with school.

Researcher: And how does this compare to high school?

Tim: High school for me was the beginning of the end so to speak. By the time I came to my freshmen year of high school, I had begun to hang out with the wrong crowd so to speak. I completely lost interest in my academics, and really school in general. I completely fell out with my parents and I would rarely go home. I began to hang out with friends that I had made from

school, and we all hated home and school. We shared a genuine disconnect from school and from our parents, and it seemed society in general.

Researcher: Tell me about your support system regarding school.

Tim: That's easy, I didn't have one. Not a practical one at least. Of course my parents would upon occasion say go to school, because they got a letter in the mail that they may have some problem if I don't go to school. There were some people who would try to help me at my school, school counselors or teachers who would advise me. However I felt that because of the fact that they were of a different ethnic group, mostly white. I felt they couldn't really relate to my situation, so I just kinda shut down and didn't want to hear anything from any one. I became like a rebellious teen you know. Actually now that I think about it, I regret how I responded to the white teachers and school counselors who tried to help me. At that age I assumed that because the teachers and counselors were white, that meant they could not relate to my problems of having parent issues, or being teased. I also assumed all whites came from families that were Brady bunch like. Of course now I realize how silly of an assumption that was, and I can recognize how distorted my thinking was due to the misplaced feelings I was having about my poor relationship with my parents. I kinda felt like if my parents don't genuinely care about me, then how can anyone else, especially someone of European descent? I just couldn't bring myself to believe that if ones parents don't care about them, other non relatives could. Therefore I could say that people at my school attempted to support me when they saw me struggling. However I wasn't ready to receive any help as I wasn't able to manage the rejection I felt from my parents, and as a result I became self destructive.

Researcher: I really admire your ability to articulate so well what you where feeling and thinking in those moments with such poignant description. I can remember experiencing similar kinds of

confusions when I was a teenager. A feeling of no one understands me, and just being confused and making poor choices. Are their teachers or events that you remember as very negative or very positive?

Tim: I can remember all my teachers from kindergarten through fourth grade as being very loving and amazing people. Especially my second grade teacher, I had two teachers in second grade. One man and one woman, and the woman had to leave before the year ended. I actually cried because she had to leave. I am grateful for the care and attention I received from all my teachers kindergarten through fourth grade, they were truly some of the best people I've ever meet in my life. When I reached high school, I can remember a teacher who said he doesn't care rather we the students come to school or not. He will be paid no matter if we show up or not, and that statement of his rubbed me in the wrong direction. I wasn't prepared to hear such a statement from my teacher, and it helped to push me out the door of high school.

Researcher: What memories do you think made the greatest difference in your life?

Tim: I believe my elementary school experience were some of the happiest memories of my life until now. However with in my elementary experience, I believe my second grade year made the biggest difference in my life.

Researcher: So at what point exactly do you think you decided to drop out?

Tim: Well, it wasn't like I made a conscious decision to just drop out. I had missed so many days, and so many assignments. I felt heavy in my head from the burden of thinking about all the missed work that I would have to make up. In addition to that I had household problems, I also felt like I couldn't keep up with the demands of clothing and pop culture in order not to be bullied or teased. So gradually I just left school. After so many days went by of not going I told myself I can't go back, it would be impossible to do all what I would need to in order to pass my

courses. I also just felt overwhelmed at that particular point in my life. I guess I was trying to just let some things go, so I didn't feel so burdened or overwhelmed.

Researcher: What were your priorities when you left school?

Tim: To be honest I didn't have any, and therein lays the problem. I suppose if I would have had priorities, I would not have dropped out of school. After dropping out in the ninth grade I would go on to engage in criminal activity. I started selling and using drugs, and breaking into peoples' homes, and stealing from stores. This would go on for a number of years until I would eventually become incarcerated.

Researcher: Wow! So you go from a relatively good kid who loves school, to hating school dropping out and going on to a life of crime. Do you think your school experience is typical?

Tim: You know man I don't profess to know anything about the average experience of the black male in America. But what I can say is that for most black men that I know and that I have ran into, and from what they have told me of black males that they have known or have meet. I would say the experience was pretty typical of my time. That is due to peer pressure, and or problems at home the student begins to gradually disconnect from the school system. I've heard about school systems in other parts of the country, and I actually have no bad feelings against the system that we have here in the Twin Cities. In fact I'm grateful for my having grown up and went to school in this community. When I hear stories about other school systems throughout the country, I feel extremely grateful to have grown up and attended school here in the Twin Cities. I now see that once I began to experience hurt, disappointment, and rejection form my parents, and I wasn't able to handle those feelings in a healthy way. That is where my problems as a person really began to come in, and because of my good relationship with my teachers in school I was

actually saved from such feelings for years, because I was so into school it was almost as if my parents didn't even exist.

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