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Black Virgin Islands Male High School Dropouts: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The dropout phenomenon involving Black Virgin Islands male high school students residing in the United States Virgin Islands has become a major area of concern for parents, educators, policy makers, and other community stakeholders. However, little is known about the direct or indirect factors that lead many Black Virgin Islands male students to drop out of high school. For the actual study, the researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of seven Black Virgin Islands males who dropped out of high school. The study results revealed seven important themes (a) grade retention, (b) disengagement with school officials, (c) adequate intake, (d) stress, (e) socioeconomics, (f) parental disengagement, and (g) low effort. These findings have important implications for parents and school officials, with respect to designing and implementing effective intervention strategies that will aid in Black Virgin Islands male students remaining in and graduating from high school.

Keywords

Phenomenology, High School Dropouts, Black Virgin Islands Males, Qualitative, United States Virgin Islands

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Black Virgin Islands Male High School Dropouts: A Qualitative Study

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The dropout phenomenon involving Black Virgin Islands male high school students residing in the United States Virgin Islands has become a major area of concern for parents, educators, policy makers, and other community stakeholders. However, little is known about the direct or indirect factors that lead many Black Virgin Islands male students to drop out of high school. For the actual study, the researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of seven Black Virgin Islands males who dropped out of high school. The study results revealed seven important themes (a) grade retention, (b) disengagement with school officials, (c) adequate intake, (d) stress, (e) socioeconomics, (f) parental disengagement, and (g) low effort. These findings have important implications for parents and school officials, with respect to designing and implementing effective intervention strategies that will aid in Black Virgin Islands male students remaining in and graduating from high school. Keywords: Phenomenology, High School Dropouts, Black Virgin Islands Males, Qualitative, United States Virgin Islands

The issue of Black male students dropping out of high school has taken on increased importance among administrators, policymakers, parents, teachers, and school counselors (Schott Foundation of Public Education [Schott Foundation], 2012). For over a century, a high school diploma has been considered one of the ideal pathways to upward social mobility (e.g., higher paying jobs, middle class status) for Americans (Schott Foundation, 2012). However, the issue of students dropping out of high school remains a persistent concern (Bell, 2014). Further analysis of the statistics associated with the high school graduation rate of Black male students reveals a troubling trend. Results of an analysis of state reported graduation rates (2009-10 school year) indicated that in 38 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Black males had the lowest graduation rates among Black, Latino, and White non-Latino male and female students (Schott Foundation, 2012). Bell (2009) listed issues such as peer pressure and educational biases as contributing factors that hinder Black males from graduating from high school at a higher rate. Black male students' association with the high school dropout phenomenon has reached a critical level, especially in the United States (Bell, 2014). African American male students represent approximately 50% of the estimated 30% of high school students who drop out each year across the United States (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Failing to graduate from high school creates economic and social hurdles for African American males that include higher incarceration rates, poverty, and unemployment (Jordan & Cooper, 2003).

The dropout phenomenon involving Black male students has also reached a perilous level in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), as data associated with the high school dropout phenomenon in the USVI reveal an alarming picture. From the 2011-2012 to 2013-2014 school years, approximately 456 male students dropped out of high school in the USVI. Of these 456 male high school students, 352 (77% of the dropout population) were categorized under the Black male (non-Hispanic) header (The Virgin Islands Department of Education, 2015). During the stated period, 146 (41%) of the 352 high school students who dropped out of school were listed under the St. Croix header. This alarming statistic has major societal, economic,

and law enforcement ramifications for the entire USVI. For example, the USVI has the highest prison rate for the islands holding the status of being territories of the United States (Harney & Hawley-Ferrol, 2012). Considering the severe social and economic conditions facing the people residing on the island of St. Croix, it is imperative that attention be given to Black male high school dropouts in that jurisdiction.

Weiner's (1974) attribution theory was the theoretical framework selected for this study. The concern within attribution theory is on how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behavior. Weiner's (1980) theory has been widely applied in the fields of education and psychology. Weiner's (2005) attribution theory has three stages: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. Weiner (1974) identified ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck as the most important factors affecting attributions for achievement.

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of Black Virgin Islands males who dropped out of high school. The purpose of the current study was to obtain insight into factors participants may have experienced that contributed directly or indirectly to them dropping out of high school.

Literature Review

The mindset to drop out of school can begin at the elementary grade levels, and the process of dropping out of school can be influenced by family dynamics, behavioral factors, and personal influences (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007). The economic and societal consequences for Black male students who drop out of school are staggering (Bell, 2014). Previous researchers identified nutrition, stress, and the importance of African American fathers in the lives of their sons as factors to consider when developing strategies to combat the dropout phenomenon among Black male adolescents (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011; Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003; Toldson, 2008). Other relevant factors to consider include socioeconomic and school-based factors. Research shows that not having breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance (Pollitt & Matthews, 1998). In the area of nutrition, hunger and food insufficiency in children are associated with poor behavioral and academic functioning (Alaimo, Olsen, & Frongillo, 2001). Eating more healthy foods and fewer junk foods is associated with high achievement, and African American male students in one study who reported eating raw vegetables were significantly more likely to report higher levels of academic performance (Toldson, 2008).

Stress is defined as an imbalance between environmental demands and a person's coping resources that at some level disrupts the equilibrium of the person (Goldberger & Breznitz, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adolescence is associated with a particularly high frequency of potentially stressful life experiences, including biological, environmental, and psychosocial changes (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Petersen & Taylor, 1980). Some adolescents, particularly ethnic minority adolescents, encounter stressors related to low socioeconomic status (SES), which entails residency in high crime, poverty stricken, and high unemployment communities (Gillock & Reyes, 1999). Urban, Black male adolescents, as a result of their exposure to high-risk settings, have been found to exhibit extremely high levels of depression in comparison with adolescents from other social or ethnic groups (Henfield, 2013). Lowe and Dotterer (2013) found high levels of parental monitoring in the context of warm relationships with fathers predicted less school trouble for both boys and girls, but the association was stronger for boys. Factors influencing the involvement of African American fathers in the lives of their children have often not been properly understood (Cochran, 1997). Studies that have included African American fathers have shown that African American fathers, in general, have been found to be more involved in the socialization of their children compared to their White counterparts (McAdoo, 1993). With respect to household

composition, in one study, African American adolescent males with a father in the home reported higher levels of academic achievement (Toldson, 2008). The positive impact of the father's presence could indicate mutual child rearing, shared financial allocation, and less stress on family members (Toldson, 2008).

SES refers to an individual's access to economic and social resources and the social privileges derived from acquiring these resources (Hauser & Warren, 1997; Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Research continues to link lower SES to lower achievement among students. Family poverty is one socioeconomic dimension that warrants increased attention, as it is associated with a number of adverse conditions, including decreased child academic achievement (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Shonkoff and Garner (2012), drawing on the multidisciplinary science of human development, presented an ecobiodevelopmental framework to describe how early experiences and environmental influences can affect school readiness and later academic achievement. Toxic stressors (e.g., child abuse, poverty, unhealthy maternal lifestyle), if not buffered by supportive early relationships, can cause permanent changes in brain structure and functioning (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). African American adolescents are especially susceptible to the effects of family poverty, as poverty has become increasingly concentrated in geographical environments (e.g., inner cities) heavily occupied by African American families (McLoyd, 1998).

School-based issues, such as transitioning to the ninth grade, retention and suspension, school violence, parental involvement, effort, and student-teacher relationships, can play important roles in contributing to the educational achievement or decline of Black male high school students. The transition to high school has been linked to increased stress levels and a heightened risk of maladjustment behaviors (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1993). The dramatic changes associated with transitioning to a higher grade level can be especially detrimental to African American male students. These students are disproportionately affected by the increased emphasis on discipline in many schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Simmons, Black, and Zhou (1991) found African American male students showed the greatest increase in the incidence of suspensions after the transition to middle school. Zero tolerance and get-tough policies at the high school level have disproportionately affected African American male students. Grade retention and suspensions are two of the biggest impediments associated with the academic success of Black male students. Grade retention is defined as the practice of having students repeat a year of schooling in which they did not meet certain educational or social (maturational) standards (Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Black students are more likely to be retained than are White students, and boys are twice as likely as girls (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Students who drop out of school are five times more likely to have been retained than are those who persist until graduation. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Suspension from school refers to "the exclusion of students from the school setting for a specific period of time" (Morrison & Skiba, 2001 p. 174). The available data indicate that Black male students are disproportionately suspended from many school districts across the nation (Smith & Harper, 2015). During the 2011-12 academic year, Blacks represented 35% of the boys suspended from K-12 public schools in the United States (Smith & Harper, 2015). Research has shown that out-of-school suspension in the ninth grade correlates with lower high school graduation rates, and higher suspension rates are closely linked with elevated high school dropout rates (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Marchbanks et al., 2015). The constant attempt to exclude students, especially Black boys, from school grounds through the suspension process can profoundly disrupt their academic achievement and performance (Smith & Harper, 2015).

School violence refers to violence that occurs on school property, on the way to or from school, or during a school sponsored event (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Flannery, Wester, and Singer (2004) found that high school students with "high violence

exposure” at school were significantly more likely to report clinical levels of psychological trauma symptoms than were students exposed to low levels of violence. Unsafe school environments create a less productive learning setting and increase the probability of additional student disruptions (Will-Burdick, 2013). Unsafe school environments may be especially detrimental to the academic, psychological, and physical well-being of school-age Black males. Results from a Health Behavior in School Age Children (HBSC) survey revealed school-age Black males were more likely to feel unsafe at school than were Caucasian or Hispanic Americans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Academic involvement on the part of African American parents may be especially beneficial to African American adolescent males (Maton, Hrabowski, & Greif, 1998). Diverse parenting practices such as parent monitoring and warm parent–child relationships have been positively associated with the academic outcomes of minority youth (Henry, Plunkett, & Sands, 2011). Haynes (2012) examined parental ratings of a multidimensional construct of parental involvement and found African American parents were more likely to promote school success in their high school adolescents by engaging in more frequent conversations about school and the benefits of acquiring knowledge, as opposed to engaging in direct school involvement or merely having high values about academic success. In another study, Jeynes (2005b) found that parental involvement had a positive influence on the academic outcomes of African American seniors. African American students with highly involved parents had an advantage over those whose parents were less involved.

Carbonaro (2005) defined effort as the amount of time and energy students expend in meeting the formal academic requirements established by their teachers or schools. When students in the classroom exert effort they typically receive an extrinsic reward (i.e., good grades). Kelly (2008) found that in addition to achievement, effort and participation in class were major predictors of student grades. Average students had the opportunity to receive high marks when they engaged in class, remained focused, and completed their assignments. Fraja, Oliverira, and Zanchi (2010) suggested that if children, parents, and their teachers exert more effort, the academic performance of children will improve.

Regarding student–teacher engagement, Toldson (2008) found across three national surveys that high achieving Black male students reported high personal interest in their academic well-being on the part of their teachers. Overall, highly academically successful Black male students perceived their teachers as helping to build on their educational strengths and in overcoming weaknesses. Allen (2015) examined the principles and practices of teachers of Black males in a U.S. secondary school setting and found successful teachers drew upon structural and cultural explanations of Black male students’ academic and social outcomes while engaging in practices (e.g., suspended judgment, challenging self-defeating beliefs) that challenged the school impediments for Black male students.

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of Black Virgin Islands male students who dropped out of high school. The rationale for conducting this study was the realization of an existing gap in the literature regarding the dropout phenomenon involving Black male high school students in the United States Virgin Islands. Limited research has been done on the educational attainment challenges facing Black Virgin Islands male students in comparison to African American males (Bell, 2009; Toldson, 2008). The lack of information could lead individuals to assume that a dropout problem does not exist in the USVI among male adolescent students of Black African ancestry. Filling the gap in the literature is a vital step in obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the challenges facing young Black Virgin Islands male students in relation to high school completion.

Researcher's Role

The author has over thirteen years' experience working as a school counselor with diverse groups of students on both the primary and secondary grade levels. Interest in the dropout phenomenon emerged after the author enrolled in a doctoral program in 2012. When reviewing the literature, the value of exploring the lived experiences of Black Virgin Islands males who dropped out of high school became apparent. Based on the responses of participants, documenting and reporting the findings in a research paper was undertaken.

Methodology

Phenomenology as the Research Approach

Phenomenological research involves a recursive pattern of data collection, interpretation, modification, and further data gathering as participants and researchers interact (Morrissette, 2000). Using a phenomenological approach is appropriate when the rationale of the research is to understand the lived experiences of individuals (Erford, 2008). Using phenomenology, data can be obtained and collected from participants who experienced the phenomenon, and a multi-faceted explanation of their experiences can be acquired (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenologists seek to understand the individual's life-world and then explain that life world as it relates to a distinct experience (Erford, 2008). Entering the lived world of research participants allows for greater appreciation of the unique experiences of individuals. Gaining insight into individual experiences also enable researchers to search for commonality among experiences (Erford, 2008). A phenomenological approach was chosen for this research study because the researcher wanted to acquire a greater understanding of the experiences of Black Virgin Islands males who dropped out of high school. Although other qualitative research traditions exist, including case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative research, hermeneutics, action research, and postmodernism/poststructuralism (Creswell, 2007; Erford, 2008), the design, goals, and purpose of the current study were more aligned with a phenomenological design.

Ethical Consideration, Informed Consent, and Confidentiality

A researcher is responsible for the welfare and overall well-being of respondents (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The researcher followed the guidelines established by the American Counseling Association (2014) in its *Code of Ethics*. Each research participant received a consent letter that explained the purpose of the study. Information on the interview process and the estimated length of time to conduct each interview was included in the consent letter. Participants were asked to read and then sign the consent form agreeing to the terms and conditions outlined in the document prior to being interviewed. Participants were reminded in the consent letter that participation in the study was voluntary, and they could terminate their involvement at any time during the research process. Participants were also informed on the consent letter that their identities would remain confidential during and after the research study was conducted. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the seven participants. Participants were also informed that a follow-up interview might be necessary to clarify statements or acquire additional information. Member checking was used to give respondents an opportunity to review their transcripts (Glesne, 2006). Each respondent had the opportunity to review, verify accuracy, clarify, elaborate, or dispute statements if needed. Permission to conduct the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Argosy University Sarasota.

Setting and Participant Selection

This study involved individual interviews with seven Black Virgin Islands men on the island of St. Croix in the United States Virgin Islands. St. Croix was selected as it is the largest island with the second highest population in the USVI. The participants in the study were seven Black Virgin Islands men who self-identified as high school dropouts. Two additional participants verbally agreed to participate in the study but declined because of personal matters. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years with a mean age of 24. Three participants started but did not complete the ninth grade, two participants started but did not complete the 10th grade, and two participants started but did not complete the 11th grade. Table 1 shows the age and grade level for each participant.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age	Grade
Barry	18	10
Peter	20	9
Dexter	28	9
Jason	22	11
Antonio	34	10
Calvin	29	9
Anwar	21	11

Participant recruitment involved placing flyers in strategic high visibility locations throughout St. Croix with the hope of recruiting Black men who met the requirements and were willing to participate in the study. On the flyer, the researcher included information about the study, a telephone number, and an e-mail address a possible participant could use to contact the researcher. Potential participants contacted the researcher and were provided information on how they could participate in the study if they met the requirements. Although many strategies exist for selecting participants, purposeful sampling was used for the current study. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative methodologies when the researcher is more interested in diverse data sources than the generalizability of results (Erford, 2008). Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Data Collection Procedure

The interview format was based on Kvale's (1996) seven stages of interview investigation. The actual interviews were open ended and structured to allow participants the opportunity to discuss their lived experience as openly as possible. The interview questions were developed from the literature review and in consultation with the researcher's dissertation committee chair to address the research questions. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix A for interview questions). Participants were allowed to discuss the dropout phenomenon through their lived experience. However, the interview format also allowed the discussion to progress in a logical manner. On average, each interview session lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was audio recorded to ensure accuracy. The researcher took notes as the participants answered the interview questions. The researcher asked participants to clarify their interview answers when responses were unclear. The researcher before concluding the

interview asked the participants if they would like to elaborate or provide additional information that was not discussed during the interview.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed and analyzed the data using guidelines recommended by Morrissette's (1999). First, following each interview, the audiotape was carefully listened to and reviewed in order to process the experiences described by the participants. Second, each interview was transcribed by the researcher in a written protocol and read several times in order to highlight key words and significant statements made by the participants. Third, the significant statements were paraphrased and assigned a theme (See Appendix B). This was essential in allowing the researcher to reflect on consistencies and differences between participants.

Fourth, a Second Order Thematic Cluster was developed which involved clustering participant's themes and including a general description. These general descriptions reflect on the essence of experience within the prepared themes of each participant. The thematic clustering process provides a structure whereby the essence of participants experiences can be compared and understood. Fifth, a within person analysis, involving reflecting on and summarizing the participant's experiences were developed. Each significant statement that shared a common element to support the resulting analysis was noted. Sixth, the various themes that emerged from each individual protocol were reflected upon. The resulting overview provided the researcher with the opportunity to compare the experiences of participants in a descriptive format. Seventh, the overall clustered themes for all participants were presented in a grid format (see Appendix C). The grid format allows for a quick visual reference to specific themes that may or may not be present within each participant's experiences.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness is a major concern in qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) preferred using the terminology credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability instead of validity and reliability in relation to evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Credibility refers to whether the participants' perceptions match up with the researcher's portrayal of them (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Issues of credibility in this study were addressed through clarifying assumptions up front and charting interpretations through journal entries. This allowed for greater self-reflection on the part of the researcher. Transferability refers to the degree to which the results can be generalized to other contexts and settings (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

In this study, detailed descriptions were provided on the widest range of information possible to provide a complete account of the research process. Dependability in qualitative research refers to whether one can track the process and procedures used to collect and interpret the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Data were collected, analyzed, and a detailed explanation of how the data collection process occurred was presented. Confirmability assumes the findings of the study are genuinely reflective of the participants' perspectives within the context (Erford, 2008). A reflective journal was used throughout the investigation so other researchers could evaluate the research process and findings (Merchant, 1997).

Each participant was given the opportunity to clarify the accuracy of his statements through the member checking process. A hard copy transcript was provided to each participant to review and verify the accuracy of his responses. Six participants verbally responded in the affirmative to the researcher that the responses were accurate. One participant verbally stated

that he had no interest in reviewing his transcript. None of the participants provided clarification of any previous statements or wanted to provide additional information.

Results

Grade retention. Participants described the experience of being retained in elementary or middle school and in some cases multiple times before their freshman year of high school. Dexter stated, “Yeah, a couple of times [in] third and seventh grade. I wasn’t doing well in school, but the experience opened my eyes that I needed to do better.” Jason described his experience with grade retention by stating, “Yes, I was retained in the first grade because I had a hard time writing my name and writing in general. I didn’t like being retained for something so simple.” Antonio remarked on how being retained made him feel intellectually deficient: “Yes, I was retained in the first and fourth grade. I felt bad, like I was not smart enough.”

Disengagement with school officials. While discussing their high school experiences, participants commented on not speaking to any school official (e.g., administrator, counselor, teacher, support staff) before dropping out of high school. Barry said, “No, I didn’t communicate with anyone. You know that wasn’t on my mind.” Peter reflected on what could have been academically possible if he had not remained silent surrounding the challenges in his life: “I didn’t go to anyone for help. I would keep everything to myself. That was a bad thing. I feel if I had reached out to someone for some kind of help, I might have finished school.”

Adequate intake. Most participants commented on not having a healthy nutritional meal in the morning on a regular basis before attending their high school classes. In some instances, not having a healthy nutritional meal in the morning started at the elementary level. Barry said, “Yeah, it was difficult to concentrate at times. I started going to school hungry in elementary school and it continued into high school. It wasn’t all the time, but it happened. It is something that you deal with.” Peter mentioned, “Most of the time, I went to school hungry. It was a regular thing that started in elementary. Being hungry impacted my learning and concentration.”

Stress. Most participants expressed experiencing stress before dropping out of high school. Barry elaborated:

Well, my stress level was high. I had a lot going on. I had to make a decision to focus on surviving or going to school. [short pause] I made the decision to focus on surviving. I had to make that decision. I needed to find a job and take care of myself.

Calvin stated, “My stress level was moderate. I had made up my mind to drop out of school.”

Socioeconomics. Participants described needing to make money for various reasons, including taking care of basic needs and providing home-based financial assistance. Anwar recalled:

Well, the reason why I didn’t complete high school was that I was working and still going to school. Well, I had my work supplies, and when it was time to go home, I looked into my bag and I found my work supplies had been confiscated. I asked if I could get my stuff back. I then got into a confrontation with the monitor and principal at the school, and from that day on, I decided not to go back to school. I could have gone back to the school, but I didn’t feel like the principal wanted me around. The principal didn’t like me, and I didn’t like the principal either. Plus, I wanted to make money. Yeah, to help around the house.

Barry described his reason for dropping out of high school in the following manner: “I turned 18 and I needed to work. I needed to get a place to live and move on.” Calvin explained how peers and the need to make money influenced his decision to drop out of high school:

Seeing my friends hanging out on the corner. I thought that was fun. Most of those guys didn’t work and my thing was about making the money. I thought I could make enough money to suffice in life, so I decided to drop out of school to see if I could make that money. I did start making money and that was basically it.

Parental disengagement. While elaborating on their high school experiences, participants described the impact of limited to nonexistent parental support. Peter described his experience by stating:

No, my parents were not supportive. Yeah, my father would beat me pretty bad. Most of the time his punishment was that you cannot eat this or you cannot eat that. All kind of dumb heck. My mother was soft. They were not involved much in my high school education.

Barry explained:

No, my parents were not very supportive, especially my dad. I had problems at home. My dad wasn’t around much. I started living with my older brother and he tried his best. I got myself into trouble and I made poor decisions. I had anger management issues.

Low effort. Peter and Calvin commented on how being mentally disengaged from school-related activities affected their effort level. Peter said:

My effort level was low because I already had my mind made up that I didn’t want to be in school anymore. Yeah, it started when I was in junior high school. I was dealing with all kind of things with my father. Problems at home.

Calvin mentioned:

I did my schoolwork because I had to do it, but I didn’t have much interest in it. I would do my homework and that was it, but to take a little effort and do what I needed to do, I wasn’t really interested in that.

Discussion

The focus of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of Black Virgin Islands male students who dropped out of high school. The lived experiences described by the participants emphasize the importance of using individualized instruction within a learning environment where students are engaged, self-motivated, and academically supported by both school personnel and parents. School administrators, school counselors, teachers, and support staff can help students achieve their academic goals by creating a school climate that is nurturing and inclusive. School officials should be prepared and ready to offer targeted and effective intervention approaches to students who are at risk of dropping out of high school.

This level of cooperation and engagement may prompt students to seek out the support and guidance of school officials before making a life-altering decision such as dropping out of high school.

The current study's findings share similarities with previous research into factors that may contribute directly or indirectly to students dropping out of high school. Results from the present study were consistent with the findings of previous research in the areas of grade retention, stress, and parental engagement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003; Toldson, 2008). Grade retention continues to be one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Responses from participants indicate the potentially negative impact of early grade retention on future educational advancement. High school students experience developmental and social issues that can lead to stress. Stressful situations can cause students to think irrationally and make poor decisions. The previous statement may be even more applicable to students who are on the brink of dropping out of high school.

Findings of the current study were consistent with the literature that showed limited to nonexistent parental engagement can have a detrimental impact on the academic success of a student (Bean, 2013; Jimerson et al., 2002; Toldson, 2008). Students who do not feel supported by their parents may become academically isolated and not communicate their intentions to terminate their high school experience before graduating with a diploma. It should be noted that other factors, including substance abuse and involvement in the juvenile justice system may also affect the academic achievement of students.

Limitations

There were several limitations in this study that should be discussed. The sample size for the study was small. The researcher established an initial objective of interviewing no fewer than 12 participants, but this goal did not materialize. Several potential participants stated they did not want to participate in the study after further consideration for personal reasons. Because the study only included Black Virgin Islands male students from the island of St. Croix, the findings may not be transferable to other racial or ethnic individuals. This limitation does not diminish the importance of the study, but it does demonstrate the limits of conducting research with only one demographic group. Another limitation is the information provided by participants could not be independently verified. There are potential biases in self-reported data as participants may exaggerate or even dismiss certain life experiences.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are several recommendations worth mentioning. First, educational professionals should evaluate whether grade retention provides benefits to students who are struggling with social adjustment or academic issues. Based on the findings of this study, systematic, evidence-based interventions could be a more effective intervention approach than grade retention, especially at the elementary level. Second, there is a tremendous need to promote healthy eating patterns among students at the primary and secondary grade levels. Initiatives that promote healthy nutrition habits can go a long way in educating student, parents, and community stakeholders about the connection between healthy eating and academic achievement. Third, evidence-based and data-driven programs that strengthen families can assist parents in learning to communicate effectively with a child who is contemplating dropping out of high school. Fourth, school officials to include administrators, school counselors, and teachers, should work more closely with students to assess their academic strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative for teachers to use effective instructional practices

to keep students motivated and engaged in the learning process. Fifth, appropriate resources and personnel, especially at the middle and high school levels, need to be deployed to help students deal with stress. Wellness-based strategies should be included in the middle and high school curriculum. Sixth, there is a need for the study to be replicated. During the replication process, it would be interesting to examine the lived experiences of Black Virgin Islands male students who were substance abusers or adjudicated minors at the time they made the decision to drop out of high school. Seventh, the area of generational academic underachievement would be an interesting subject to explore as it relates to the dropout phenomenon. What were the lived experiences of family members who may have also dropped out of school? Did other family members dropping out of school influence participants to drop out of high school?

Conclusion

In summary, this study involved the use of a qualitative, phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of seven Black Virgin Islands male students who dropped out of high school. Participants mentioned similar pivotal moments of their lived experiences associated with dropping out of high school. However, the experiences described by each participant was unique and indispensable. Finally, results revealed that effective intervention strategies are needed to motivate students to stay in high school. Individualized intervention approaches may facilitate classroom success, which, in turn, could lead to higher student engagement and achievement.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Were you ever retained in school, if so what grade or grades and why?
2. Were you ever suspended from school? If yes, what grade or grades and why?
3. How would you describe yourself as a student? Explain.
4. How do you think your teachers viewed you in high school?
5. Do you feel your high school teachers were supportive of you academically? If not, explain.
6. Describe your parents or legal guardian involvement in your high school education.
7. Do you feel your parents or legal guardian were supportive of you academically? If not, explain?
8. Did your parents or legal guardian complete high school? What are the academic achievements of other family members?
9. Describe your transition from middle to high school. Do you feel that you were emotionally, psychologically, socially, and academically ready for high school?
10. Describe your high school environment and appearance. Do you think the physical environment was conducive to learning? If not, explain.
11. Did you feel safe in high school from acts of violence? If not, explain.
12. Did your high school teachers ever compliment your school work performance? If so, what were several of the compliments offered?
13. Did you ever attend classes in high school before first having a nutritional meal in the morning? How often?
14. Do you feel your academic performance was impacted because of an unsafe school environment? If yes, explain.
15. When did you decide to drop out of high school? How did you make that decision? Give the reasons why you dropped out of high school.
16. How would you describe your level of effort (High, Moderate, or Low) in completing your school work and home learning activities when you were a high school student?
17. Did outside factors influence your decision to drop out of school?
18. Did you speak to any school official (administrator, counselor, teacher, support staff) before dropping out of high school? If not, describe why?
19. Did you speak to your parents or legal guardian before dropping out of high school? If not, describe why?
20. How would you describe your relationship with your school counselor?
21. How would you describe your level of stress (High, Moderate, Low) in high school? Do you feel that your stress level in high school influenced your decision to drop out of high school? If yes, explain.
22. What suggestions would you give school officials in regards to helping Black Virgin Islands male students stay and graduate from high school?

Appendix B

First Order Thematic Construct of Peter's Experience

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Paraphrase	Theme
"I was retained in the fourth and eighth grade. To me it kind of mess me up man. I wanted to finish school, you know what I mean. It just didn't happen."	Being retained more than once impeded academic progression. However, completing high school was still the desired outcome.	What could have been

Appendix C

Second Order Themes	Participants						
	Barry	Peter	Dexter	Jason	Antonio	Calvin	Anwar
Grade Retention		X	X	X	X	X	X
Disengagement (School Officials)	X	X		X	X		X
Adequate Intake	X	X			X	X	X
Stress	X	X	X		X	X	
Socioeconomics	X					X	X
Parental Disengagement	X	X					
Low Effort		X				X	

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