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Resiliency and Goals: A Phenomenological Exploration of African American Male Attrition in High School

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Abstract

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Keywords

African American males, attrition, phenomenology, graduation, high school

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This article describes a phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences and perceptions of African American males with high school attrition. Sixteen event dropouts participated in individually taped semi-structured interviews, producing descriptive themes that were analyzed. Results from this study revealed eight major themes of (a) school climate matters, (b) social and emotional skills enhance development, (c) share responsibility of educational expectations, (d) support lacking, (e) engaging at-risk behavior, (f) apathetic view of education, (g) motivation is the education multiplier, and (h) respect is key to graduation. Findings and implications for stakeholders and future research are included that might prove helpful in closing the achievement and opportunity gaps within the African American male demographic.

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Introduction

High school attrition is a costly proposition for society. Annual costs for 8th through 12th grade student withdrawals in the United States exceed \$319 billion (Johnston, 2011). Socioeconomic factors of lost wages, taxable income, health care, welfare, and incarceration comprise this major cost to Americans (All4Ed, 2013; Johnston, 2011; McFarland et al., 2018). The economic and social costs to taxpayers increase as more young people leave the education system, voluntarily or involuntarily, and become part of a dropout cohort (McFarland et al., 2018). The importance of improving attrition rates cannot be overstated.

Fortunately, trending data beginning in 1972 indicate improvement in high school dropout rates among Whites and African Americans (Stark et al., 2015). However, a disparate gap still exists and is periodically growing between various student populations. African American dropout rates were approximately double that of Whites in 1972 (9.6% compared to 5.3% dropout rate for African Americans; Stark et al., 2015). Although dropout rates across every demographic trended downward in 2012, the gap in dropout rates between minorities and Whites widened by a range of 4.3 times that of African Americans (Stark et al., 2015). In 2014, the aggregate downward dropout trend continued in both male and race demographics as Whites remained below the national event dropout rate average of 5.2% and African Americans above the national average (McFarland et al., 2018).

To provide further context, according to McFarland, Stark, and Cui (2016), the high school event dropout rate of 5.8% for African Americans and 5.8% for students in the southern region of the United States registered at the top of their respective categories in 2012, including the highest number and percent for event dropouts enrolled and population and percent of enrolled dropouts. The term “event dropout rate” represents students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a

diploma or alternate graduation credential (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2012; Stark et al., 2015).

High school attrition is the proverbial “gift” that keeps on giving. A lingering effect of attrition for high school students occurs because “one in 40 Americans never graduated from high school” (Johnston, 2011). Many of those individuals now range in age from 40-70 years old. The cumulative effect of students not completing high school is reflected in a society where Americans who never finished high school compete for jobs that require the minimum of a high school diploma or its equivalent (All4Ed, 2013; Johnston, 2011). The shortcoming of not having high school graduation credentials is a discriminator that is difficult to overcome, especially economically (All4Ed, 2013; Rumberger, 2012). Economist Cecilia Rouse estimates one cohort of dropouts cost the nation \$58 billion in lost tax revenue and greater than \$165 billion in possible economic income over a lifetime (Rumberger, 2012, para. 7). Government welfare benefits and victim expenses associated with increased criminal activity in the dropout population contribute to higher taxpayer expenses (Rumberger, 2012).

The cost of secondary attrition extends beyond the individual dropout into society where the economic impact is immediate and lasting (All4Ed, 2013; Johnston, 2011). The improvement trends for attrition and graduation rates indicate an understanding, in the aggregate, that there are economic advantages for students to remain in school and earn a diploma (Balfanz, 2015). Demographic trends indicate African American males are on track to experience the same economic opportunities at a pace exceedingly slower than other demographics (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Stark et al., 2015).

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature search revealed historical achievement and opportunity gaps in secondary education settings. Two key movements, aptly named High School Movement and Civil Rights Movement, placed much needed spotlights on social capital and inequality. Driven to strengthen the economy, the United States realized an investment in human capital could spur productivity (Friedlaender et al., 2014; Goldin, 2001; Morsy & Rothstein, 2015). The High School Movement era, 1910-1940, transformed the United States into the most educated country with the most successful economy and education system (Goldin & Katz, 1999). Hidden beneath this aggregate perspective of the economy and education system was the post-No Child Left Behind 21st century America with high concentrations of low-performing schools serving low-income students of color in segregated areas of the country (Friedlaender et al., 2014).

The increase in human capital from advances during the High School Movement era influenced social capital. The appeal of a more educated populace became socially acceptable because educated youths would engage in blue and white-collar work (Goldin, 2001), community development, community growth, and community sustainment – an estimated 12% financial return on investment for every year completed (Goldin & Katz, 1999, p. 691). Efforts to remove barriers for minorities to experience the American dream through education and socioeconomic means led to the Civil Rights Movement (Davis, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The central geographic region for the Civil Rights Movement, the largest social movement of the 20th century, was the American South where overt racial inequality in education, economic opportunity, and political/legal processes were most common (Alvah, 2003; Davis, 2014). A landmark decision to end segregation in public schools, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was key to the escalation of the struggle for civil rights (Alvah, 2003). Davis (2014) posited that the mixed legacy of the Civil Rights Movement was

that it produced legislation that reformed America but failed to meet the economic needs of poor Americans.

Key stakeholders (educators, researchers, southern governors) conveyed the severity of the dropout epidemic (DePaoli et al., 2015). Evidence-based strategies advanced school reform through incorporation of an early warning indicator and intervention system (EWS) that monitored attendance, behavior, and course performance in reading and math as early predictors of dropping out (Bruce et al., 2011). Balfanz categorized institutions susceptible to failing their mission of graduating students as having “low-promoting power,” resulting in mass numbers of under-performing schools being closed and student transfers to more productive schools (Amos, 2007; Balfanz & Legters, 2004). DePaoli et al. (2015) noted the students were primarily low-income and minority.

Research further revealed numerous cohort longitudinal studies depicting antecedents to dropout behavior and even prescribing strategies to combat the national dropout crisis; however, evidence linking prevention strategies to dropout and graduation rates is lacking (Apel, 2014; Chappell et al., 2015). Trending data in attrition and graduation rates reflect major aggregate growth and gaps that still distance minorities from other demographic subgroups. Doll et al. (2013) noted push factors such as “could not keep up with schoolwork,” “was failing school,” and “did not like school” ranked highest for leaving school early.

Most studies address dropout rate trends, types of dropouts, and strategies to predict dropout rates. Literature does not tailor models, strategies, or practices to specifically reduce attrition of 8th through 10th grade African American male students, a demographic consistently lagging the national averages for other populations (Chappell et al., 2015). However, as retention of African American males continues to improve, the cost to society will improve along with lost wages, taxable income, healthcare, incarceration, and welfare in the targeted population (Johnston, 2011). Society benefits from the study by improving the education of an otherwise troubled demographic, allowing greater opportunities for contributions to the workforce, and creating a better environment for higher learning.

This study includes the descriptive phenomenological research that allowed participants to reflexively re-live and reflect on their own lived experiences with attrition and gives their unique meaning to the phenomenon. Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, which introduced the social aspect of learning, and Bruner’s Learning Theory in Education, which contributed the perspective of learning as an active social process whereby learners construct ideas and concepts from their current knowledge, are the constructivist theories used to add relevance to this study. Constructivism is a philosophy of learning that derives knowledge of the lived world through experiencing things and reflecting on experiences (Matsuoka & Doyle, 2004), making it an excellent construct to explore the phenomenon of attrition.

Both Vygotsky and Bruner were regarded as fathers of constructivism for contributions to their respective theories (Hannum, 2015a, 2015b). In Social Development Theory investigating the perceptions, motives, and attitudes of event dropouts aligns with the aim of constructivism in determining how people construct their own knowledge of the world. Discovery learning where students construct their own knowledge (Hannum, 2015a; McLeod, 2012), emphasizing the role of environment, internal and external, on learning (Hannum, 2015a; McLeod, 2012) is integral to Learning Theory in Education. Culture and experiences, internal environment, influence perceptions and path to learning (Hannum, 2015a). The constructivist view that learning is an active process of idea formulation from current and past knowledge (Smith, 2002) aligns with the purpose of the study.

Researcher Stance

The author is an African American male, 22-year military veteran, husband, father of two elementary school boys, and department chair/educator for a high school character and leader development program. The growth and education of young adults is part of his self-proclaimed ministry.

Turning to the literature, approaches to combat waywardness or willful disobedient behavior resulting in attrition were general in nature and did not tailor models, strategies, or practices to specifically reduce attrition in the most consistently lagging demographic – African American males was discovered. Qualitative research, specifically phenomenological research, provided a superb opportunity to query young African American males and understand their lived experiences. Collectively, their experiences and perspectives were quite enlightening and will contribute immensely to the discipline of education and social and emotional interaction among stakeholders.

Method

Research Orientation

The qualitative research method and descriptive phenomenological research design were selected for exploring participants' perceptions and lived experiences with the phenomenon of attrition. This qualitative orientation gave meaning to the attrition phenomenon through the analyses of participant experiences, situations, and circumstances (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). It was assumed and confirmed that the interactive nature of descriptive phenomenology would result in additional scholarship on the phenomenon of attrition and add meaning to the experiences of participants.

Edmund Husserl founded the philosophical movement of phenomenology and espoused two distinct tenets that set it apart from other factions of the movement: intentionality and phenomenological reduction (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Reiners, 2012; Sokolowski, 2000). Intentionality is the concept of orienting the conscious mind to an object in an act of directedness (Moustakas, 1994). The self and world experience a mutually dependent relationship because of intuitively integrating the textural and structural intentions of consciousness into meanings and essences derived from experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction as a process consists of essential elements to promote heightened awareness and illumination of phenomena to assist in bringing forth the textural qualities of lived experiences. The preparatory phase of phenomenological reduction incorporates reflection to mitigate researcher bias and allow natural attitudes to surface from participant descriptions. The process uncovers the ego of the researcher and ensures the research transcends beyond researcher reality, which is accomplished by suspending one's personal perspective and judgment of the phenomenon. Transcendental-phenomenological reduction is the process that takes the researcher beyond known personal experiences and sets aside prejudgments in the epoché and focuses or reduces the phenomenon to the experiences of the participants.

Past experiences as a teacher familiar with the phenomenon of attrition were reflexively assessed and bracketed to obtain an unobstructed account of each participant's experience and achieve transcendental-phenomenological reduction and obtain the essences of the attrition phenomenon (Ryan, 2005; Schmitt, 1959; Sokolowski, 2000). Participant descriptions of their experiences of perception, memory, imagination, and thought with attrition provided the intentionality into consciousness and an in-depth inquiry of themes to explore (Reiners, 2012).

The bracketing of preconceived opinions and promotion of participant intentionality relative to the attrition phenomenon represented the ontological tasks critical to the study.

Participants

The population for the study was African American males in grades 8th through 10th who have experienced the phenomenon of attrition and been sent to appear before a District board in South Carolina. The study used non-probability purposive sampling strategy that was criterion-based to identify participants who met the required characteristics of (a) male gender, (b) African American race, (c) 13-16 years of age, and (d) experience with attrition. In this descriptive phenomenological study, 16 purposively selected participants made up the sample size.

The geographic location of the study was the midlands of South Carolina in one of 15 districts in the state that is represented in the Top-500 school districts in the nation. The chosen district was ranked last in this group of 15 for the state of South Carolina with an adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) of 72% for the 2012-2013 reporting period (Stark et al., 2015).

Adherence to ethical standards for the protection of human subjects' privacy, confidentiality, and safety in research was followed. Permission to conduct this research of participants under the age of 18 was granted by the district and guardians of each participant. A university IRB board approved ethical parameters of the study. A high degree of care and compassion for the welfare of participants and the discipline of education further legitimized the study by conveying in advance participants' rights and parameters for interview participation (Neuman, 2006).

Procedure

Recruitment on school premises and posting of the recruitment flyer for prospects to have their parent or guardian contact the researcher if interested in contributing to the study were authorized through the district's Office of Accountability, Assessment, Research, and Evaluation. Twenty-five prospective participants received a questionnaire to begin the screening process to narrow the participant pool. Letters of solicitation and full disclosure were given to each prospect along with a demographic questionnaire and informed consent form.

Participation was voluntary and non-binding. Sixteen eligible participants initially came forward, and interviews were conducted with each. It is imperative to note, the in-depth nature of purposeful sampling contributed to the high likelihood of data saturation occurring with minimal participants (Neuman, 2006; Patton, 1990). It was decided for this study data collection would continue until the attainment of data saturation to ensure the sample size was accurate, as recommended by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011). Data saturation for this study was achieved at interview 14; two more interviews confirmed saturation point attainment as new narratives no longer surfaced during data collection.

Interviews

All 16 participant interviews took place during the school day or immediately following the end of the school day to ensure convenience, provide privacy, enhance confidentiality, and protect the identity of participants. Interview room location and features offered a quiet environment for participants to concentrate, engage in the interview process, and provide quality audible feedback for the recordings. A voice recorder and smart phone were the dual modalities for voice recordings. The use of this technology was of the greatest value when used

in playback mode with participants to clarify what was being transcribed and throughout the transcription process specifically as both recordings were of high standard.

The author used a 12-step qualitative inductive methods model similar to the one introduced by Leedy and Ormrod (2010) to emphasize four key phases of data collection: (1) preparation and permissions (prepare interview questions and location, understand cultural background and obtain permissions for participant involvement), (2) participant focus (establish and maintain rapport while focusing on facts as conveyed by participants), (3) phenomenological attitude (participant expressions prevail and transcendental ego set aside), and (4) professional package (maintain professionalism to obtain maximum contribution, and create verbatim record of participant-only perceptions). This cumulative approach assured participants openly described their experiences and perceptions, providing rich data sharing from individuals intimately familiar with the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2002).

The primary use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions formed the foundation of the study (van Manen, 1990). Interviews were transcribed for participants and confirmed to ensure accuracy. Each interview lasted about one hour in duration, and the author conducted all interviews. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (Conqueror 1 through Conqueror 16) to sustain anonymity and confidentiality as study participants. Individual participants were asked a battery of questions pertaining to their lived experiences with attrition, such as, "Now that you have experienced leaving school, how would you characterize the experience of being away from school for an extended amount of time?" Probing follow-up queries were, "Describe the highest point of the experience. Describe the lowest point of the experience." Once each conqueror fully responded to all the questions, the concluding question was asked, "Is there anything else you would like to share or comments before this interview ends?"

Stages of Analysis

Edward and Welch's Modified Colaizzi Method of Analysis (2011; Moustakas, 1994) was used to synthesize participant experiences and formulate meaning to the phenomenon of attrition. The eight-step modified Colaizzi Method data analysis strategy was ideal for obtaining the lived experiential data needed for attrition analysis and establishing patterns of trustworthiness. NVivo 11 software helped to streamline the first four steps of the data organization and analysis process. First, the audiotapes and transcripts were reviewed multiple times to discern statements significant to attrition. Second, overlapping statements or those irrelevant to the phenomenon of attrition were removed and significant statements from individual transcriptions were included in a Bracketing Memo stored in the analytical software to ensure statements had equal value. Third, the identification of horizons gave textual meaning to significant statements remaining following horizontalization. The formulated initial meanings were represented in NVivo 11 by 22 parent nodes with a total of 590 references. Fourth, the five emerging theme clusters were placed in tabular form to illustrate how they align with the interview questions and three related sub questions to the central research question, "What are African American males' lived experiences with attrition in high school?"

The clustered themes from all participant responses to the three research questions were displayed in a grid format. The purpose of the overt visual reference was to assemble and link clusters as prescribed in the fifth and sixth steps of the Modified Colaizzi Method of Analysis. The emerging themes depicted a textural-structural description of the participants' (conquerors') collective experiences and perceptions on attrition and attrition influencers, barriers to dropping out of school, and benefits to remaining in school. These exhaustive meanings were helpful in providing the analysis necessary to identify the essences of the

phenomenon of attrition for the African American male demographic, thereby completing the remaining steps in the stages of analysis.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The litmus test for trustworthiness in qualitative research is comprised of four qualities: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Transcendental-phenomenological reduction and sustaining the verification process throughout the duration of the study to ensure trustworthiness was paramount (Kvale, 1989; Morse et al., 2002). Full engagement with all steps in the data collection and analysis processes was vital to establishing and sustaining credibility, transferability, and dependability. This self-correcting, iterative cycle applied to all aspects of the study and across every quality of trustworthiness (transferability, dependability, and confirmation).

In addition to the investigator having personal credible characteristics, including responsiveness, adaptability, and sensitivity for others, it is imperative to note the underlying strategy to promote credibility is building confidence and comfort in the process and participants (Morse et al., 2002; Shenton, 2004). Treating participants humanely and respectfully was accomplished by informing them of the precepts of the study and their rights. Credibility was achieved in part by clearly communicating the intent of the study and following through without exception (Morse et al., 2002).

The use of member checking data was used to enhance credibility of respondent responses and account for the environment in which data were collected from in-depth interviews, peer reviewed responses, and bracketing notes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Harper & Cole, 2012). Data from literature documentation and peer review of interview transcripts was incorporated into the verification process to identify converging themes from participant perceptions and lived experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Seidman, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

The vast details from participant lived experiences provided information to discern if data will be transferable outside of the contexts of the study (Shenton, 2004). Integral to determining trustworthiness for the quality of transferability was the ability to extract the parts of the data that relate to the research method and were transferable from those that did not relate and were not transferable. Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted trustworthiness is not predicated on studies attaining fully transferable status. This study maintained the pillar of transferability by ensuring data collection procedures and the verification process were thorough and complete, including data saturation. The study actively analyzed procedures and steps in the process for the duration of the study as a strategy to maximize investigator responsiveness and adapt to changing circumstances (Shenton, 2004).

A test for dependability took on a similar caveat, one that is linked to the dynamics of our environment, the richness of data collected, and the verification process. It was an ongoing process of checking to be mindful of any changes that occurred in society or the population that would cause a like study to garner different results. The current study meets dependability standards by ensuring the research method and design was appropriate and executed properly (Shenton, 2004).

According to Guba and Lincoln (1981) the trustworthiness construct of confirmability does not pertain to phenomenology. Conducting a descriptive phenomenological study that accounts for participants to openly communicate their perceptions and lived experiences of a phenomenon is unique to the individual. The research from this study honors the study methodology and method. Strict adherence to the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction throughout the study gave participants an opportunity to convey their natural attitude in interviews as the researcher assumed a transcendental attitude that allowed thick data

collection (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Schmitt, 1959). Confirmability for this study was achieved through data saturation.

Sustaining the epochè process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction throughout the study assisted in removing or minimizing bias and adding objectivity to the study, allowing participant descriptions of the phenomena to be bracketed and maintain participant descriptions as the focus of the study (Schmitt, 1959). The ability and willingness to not only reflect on the phenomenon of attrition as a researcher, but to take the more assertive step of becoming reflexive and suspending judgments was a critical step in the process (Ryan, 2005). Bias was controlled through consistency in bracketing and the use of field notes.

Results

The overarching essence from the experiences of African American males in this study on attrition is the target population is resilient and is highly capable of retention in high school and graduating when support and motivations align. The results revealed eight themes that were derived from data analyses of the participant responses to each of the three sub-questions from the study. The first three prominent themes were developed from data analysis of the questions pertaining to sub-question one on influencers to the attrition phenomenon, individual expectations of school prior to appearing before the disciplinary board, perspective on success, and reaction to expulsion. The next three themes dominated sub-question two relating to barriers and participant drop out experiences along the educational journey. The last sub-question addressed two major themes from data analyses of participants' experiences and perceived benefits to remain in school and graduate.

Theme I: School Climate Matters

Personal experiences in middle school and high school evoked a range of feelings from the group of 16 conquerors. These feelings were categorized as attrition influencers as participant lived experiences that positively and negatively influenced their attrition situations and conveyed insightful perceptions of school and educational success prior to being summoned to disciplinary board appearances. Attrition influencers were contextualized through apprehensive feelings of anger, fear, and lack of confidence about participants' school experiences. Conqueror 2 described "anxiety" beginning in middle school when he was chronically absent from school for illnesses and multiple surgical procedures and carrying over to high school as he was already behind academically but could not get assistance from teachers. He noted being labeled a troublemaker by teachers and peers taking advantage of him as a result.

Feelings of apprehension in the form of "fear" were also present in Conqueror 15, yet he presented in a much different manner than others in the study, likely based on personal circumstances. His middle school experience was quite turbulent. His mother was imprisoned when he was about six years old. His father raised him from this early age, but now has another family and other, younger, children have garnered the attention once received by Conqueror 15. As a result, he was constantly acting out in class. He found solace in treating school for anything other than learning:

I was doing like small stuff: interrupting the class, talking without permission, not raising my hand, getting up out of my seat, walking out the door, going places without permission, not having a pass, being late, being tardy, fighting, all of that.

Participants reported lived experiences marked by a lack of confidence in themselves, others, or the educational system. All but one of these participants volunteered experiences of harassment or bullying; the other's diminished confidence was directed at peers as Conqueror 14 was clearly not the type of young man to cower to harassment or bullying and proclaimed one "can't trust nobody" when describing how just that very week a student took his phone, led the search to help find it, and then attempted to sell it back to him the next day.

Many participants were either harassed or bullied, contributing to their lack of confidence in self. The harassment or bullying did not only come from other students; teachers were also the culprits. Conqueror 3 was of the more conventional bullying variety:

In middle school, I was small, and people tried to pick on me, so I use to get in fights a lot. I used to always fight in the bathroom from, like, sixth grade to eighth grade and then I got expelled.

Several participants took on the persona of a bully to keep from being bullied, a form of bully-abatement. The concept is to proactively demonstrate bravado to ward off potential bullies. Conqueror 5 explained:

My experience as a student. Okay, now, my experience as a student I learned a lot of stuff, seen a lot of stuff. I've seen one or three fights. I know how it goes. So, with kids down there, you always had an image in middle school. Know what I'm saying? So, I decided I didn't want the wrong image. So, as they come, I wanted to be one not to be messed with. So, the best way to create this image was to not let anyone mess with me.

In aggregate, the school climate left participants in the study feeling annoyed, vulnerable, and bitter. Upon reviewing the reflexive account of situations for structural meaning, experiences that generated physical emotions of hate and rage were even prevalent enough to establish long term attitudes about a negative school climate. The vast accounts of bullying contributed to the vulnerabilities, annoyance, and bitterness toward school climate. The results of the study depicted active participant use of the Learning Theory in Education. Bully abatement proved to be a proactive measure to being bullied and rather ill-advised action that resulted in school policy infractions and disciplinary action for the former bully victims.

Theme II: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills Enhance Development

Participants' feelings toward their school experiences covered a broad range of meaning units. Four meaning units conveyed a positive transformative nature because of attrition experiences and evoked feelings of changed, excited, high aspirations, and growth self-awareness. The most dramatic account of transformation was Conqueror 6 who responsibly reported being bullied to teachers and administration. When not taken seriously, he resorted to initiating a fight with the bully before being "jumped" after school by the bully's family. After completing the disciplinary requirements from the District Review Board, he abandoned plans to drop out of high school.

The dropout plan only changed when in high school, his resource teacher discussed the possibility of taking online courses and graduating early with a diploma, which left him again excited (another meaning unit emphasizing the transformation from an attrition experience) about education.

Conqueror 9 recovered his natural affinity for learning following failed efforts to abate potential bullying that landed him in a behavior-based program in the wilderness following

suspension for making a bomb threat. He felt strongly that the program was not for him but endured through the eighth grade. Conqueror 9 explains:

I got a charge, one for fighting up there (wilderness camp) and another for stabbing a teacher in the hand because when we were in a classroom, he was like squeezing my hand. I asked him three times to quit squeezing my hand, and he just kept getting tighter and tighter. That's when I just poked him in the hand with a pencil.

Following removal from the wilderness program and a court decision that awarded probation instead of jail time for the sole reason his Dad had just received custody, Conqueror 9 decided to change: "It made me feel good cause I loved going to school...Every day I couldn't wait to go to school...I don't see how people get in trouble for truancy when school is the place to be."

Conqueror 8 expressed high aspirations, another meaning unit indicating attrition transformation, when conveying the life lessons learned at an early age from being a follower growing up in a culture that he desires to leave behind. He is a self-described, unremorseful victim of bullying who finally took matters into his own hands, became the aggressor, and fought the bully who denied ever bullying anyone. Conqueror 8 takes ownership and even a level of pride in the missteps thus far as contributing to a more focused, mature high school student who is now on the A-Honor Roll and intent on earning a diploma and attending college. In his own words:

It's a lot of peers - kind of influence you. They're all around. You can't help but hear them and see them...Like you can tell yourself not to do something, but if the influence overcome you, you don't have the time to think because the influence is everywhere...it's always good to make a mistake because you gonna learn from it. Know that if you do this again, you're gonna get in even more trouble because you already did it once.

Conqueror 16 has been expelled four times, the most of any participant. His experiences with drugs and habitual disregard in both middle school and high school have helped form a similar perspective on peer pressure: "A lot of peer pressure, a lot of bad influences. A lot of people just doing, wanna be followers, basically. Just people, like, just doing stuff. Just being bad, being reckless" is both a self-description of past behavior and a declaration of "growth self-awareness" (the last meaning unit in attrition transformation). He admits to being that follower and now realizes the foolishness, especially after witnessing other younger students doing the same.

Contextualized feelings of enmity (hostility) toward the school experience were also common. Most of the expressions of enmity were aggressive toward either another student or their teacher. Conqueror 1's verbal attack toward a teacher not letting him borrow a pencil: "You stupid (expletive) white and you get on my nerves."

Conqueror 10's assaults on females for unwelcome behavior, an action he does not deny from a previous year's incident, but vehemently refutes a second allegation a year later that was not clearly caught on crowded school hallway cameras, "Cause I grabbed this girl's butt."

Conqueror 7 succinctly detailed the meaning unit "self-fulfilling prophecy." He said, "smoking weed, robbing people" were out of school indulgences; however, "I was bad, and they think I'm bad. They thought that I was bad, like a bad influence on other kids." By his own admission, home supervision was suspect.

Well, I was staying with my grandmother at the moment; she almost 70 years old...she couldn't discipline me like that cause she was getting old. So, really, I got to stay out late at night, rob people for some more weed with my friends or home boys. And come back at one o'clock in the morning or spend the night at his house or her house.

Conqueror 2 offered the perspective the condition created in the classroom contributed to attrition being a self-fulfilling prophecy in his journey when mentioning, "...I already didn't like it (style of teaching). The teachers didn't really help me out as much...They just gave us bookwork and tell us to go to a page and do it."

Conqueror 4 contextualized the "shame," the last of the 11 meaning units, and subsequent remorse that surfaced from not taking education seriously upon entering high school. He is a two-time repeater who has appeared before the disciplinary review board three times, all beginning as a 9th grader. Projecting to his peers, yet self-included, he asserts, "Well, when I was in middle school a lot of things, I experienced was people not taking their education serious, a lot of goofing off, just thinking it was a joke." Culture before education may be the mantra in Conqueror 4's story. He was expelled from school an entire year, beginning in October. He cites the situation as, "...this dude brung pellet guns to school and he was gonna get in trouble. He told me and this other dude to hide it. I just hid it, and I got caught with it." Although his actions – not telling on the student who brought the gun to school – led to instant street credibility with peers, the real remorse set in when those same peers wanted him to retaliate against the student who brought the gun to school.

Participants felt influences and influencers were harmful or helpful relative to their situation, context, and condition. The influence of peers and support of teachers were determined to be both helpful and harmful by participants at the highest rate. Conqueror 13 mentioned how even his brother's guidance was counterproductive, self-motivated, and misguided at an early age:

It was all right when I was in the sixth grade and halfway through seventh. I was on the honor roll...then I just got off track because my brother was putting in my head that even though I was doing good it was wrong...So I started, just started following him, following in his footsteps until I learned. Until I found out where it got me.

Participants acknowledged being their own negative influence. Conqueror 3 spoke of self harm, the second highest harmful influencer, and offered a perspective not shared by the other six participants, "Most things that are wrong entertains me, so I just do it."

Teacher support was predominantly helpful as 9 (56%) participants recounted positive lived experiences of adults attempting to keep them on the graduation track. Conqueror 11 warned "...stop hanging around them. They gonna lead me to a bad decision." Conqueror 13 cited conditional, yet positive, support, "...a good bit of teachers if they see you doing good then they going to help you out as much as they can." The use of a stipulation was a key part of many participant discussions on helpful teacher support.

Conqueror 16 reiterated quid pro quo support from teachers, "Now my teachers, they really like that I've gotten more mature. I stopped doing the bad stuff that I was doing...They trying to get me to do better, basically."

Entire family was a popular mention as helpful influencers among participants. Five (31%) noted the support of the family unit as a positive factor toward maintaining a graduation focus. Conqueror 8 mentioned siblings, parents, and aunts. His ability to discern the fact negative situations can have a positive effect in the lives of others was quite refreshing. He

noted the following when discussing uncles, twins, who were “knuckle heads”: “I learned from them not to, not to be like them. They been bad, but in the present they doing good.”

Reflecting on this theme and its transformative undertones and overt feelings on display with expressive textural meanings, it is refreshing to reflexively convey the hopeful and grateful feelings of participants. Participants were indeed positioned at varying stages on the social and emotional learning development curve; however, the level of gratitude and hope to stay the course and graduate were prevalent feelings. A consistent anthem in participant interviews was one of hope and desire to transform. When participants focused on rising from their circumstances and maturing, the opportunity to achieve a high school diploma and become a functioning member in society escalated. The study results connect the four attrition influencers of transformation (changed, excited, high aspirations, and growth through self-awareness) and self-fulfilling prophecy to overall expectations of success and help alter the education trajectory toward graduation.

Theme III: Share Responsibility for Educational Expectations

Participants were asked about expectations of school before the board decision for disciplinary action and to reflect on the meaning of success at that point along the journey. Their expectations of school were low, unrealistic, or nonexistent prior to appearing before the hearing board. Participants admitted to lacking the focus or desire to even attempt to define success in education.

Achieving good grades was a seldom noted measure of success. Maintaining adequate grades was a challenge when an exorbitant amount of seat-time was lost to suspensions and expulsions. Participants averaged more than 32 days and as low as 10 days away from school, usually without any homework. The significance of this revelation is the feelings of despair evoked from falling behind.

Conqueror 6 remarked, “First they gave me three days out of school, then they gave me two months ISS (In School Suspension) with no homework.” Conqueror 16 reported being away from school more than 90 days and declared the missed opportunity to do homework while under suspension as, “A waste of time basically. Sitting out, I couldn't do nothing. I couldn't do no work.”

Conqueror 14 has even a more direct indictment of how the experience left him feeling hopeless:

They teach good, but they can do better I know. And this ISS lady; when we had work in class, she would never let us just ask the teacher if we could get our work. She would just go tell us to go get on the computer and do her work. She wouldn't never let us get our work that we had to catch up on even if we have a test. She wouldn't never let us do what we had to do to pass.

A perceived inability of the teacher to control the learning environment was also noted by participants. Conqueror 11 is a self-proclaimed student with anger management issues who conveyed how “noise” in the learning environment “aggravated” him: “Teachers, like, they try to calm the kids down, but you can't do it because (The School) is out of control.”

Results were like multiple longitudinal studies from the past. The general cause of dropout categories from past studies implies the related results relative to students gaining knowledge and skills to cope with others and problem solve in a learning environment. Leading indicators for past research were poor study habits (National Longitudinal Study of the High school Class of 1972), did not like school (National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988), and missed too many school days (Education Longitudinal Study of 2002).

Theme IV: Support Lacking

Data analysis helped determine authentic stakeholder support was not always clear to learners. Conqueror 7, an admitted marijuana user, describes situations where the apparent support of teachers and administrators backfired:

My teachers knew what I use to do...know when you smoke the scent get in your clothes. Go inside the classroom and you smoke too much weed...your eyes gonna be red, you gonna be sleepy, gonna be hungry, you gonna smell like weed. You don't hide that.

Teachers and assistant principals initially chose not to take disciplinary action on the habitual behavior. The level of inaction may be labeled as complicit behavior on the part of the adults who were aware of what the participant was doing, leading to confusion and disdain toward the principal when the educational leader took a sterner approach to the misguided behavior. Conqueror 7's account of the experience, as the reaction from administration changed once the principal got involved:

(Conqueror 7) do not do that. I'm not gonna tell on you this time, but don't do that, don't do that. (Assistant) Principal use to always look out for me. (Conqueror 7), I'm not gonna do that anymore; sit in my office, sit in my office. They put me inside this class at the end of the year. But the principal, he wanted me gone; the head principal, he wanted me gone. But, the assistant principal, all of them, they just wanted me to stay. I didn't really care no more, man; they get on my nerves.

Conqueror 5 confided to "getting in a lot of trouble" and a guidance counselor initiated twice weekly sessions that were helpful to development. The in-school support was great, although the parental support at home was a shortcoming. Parental support came primarily by way of dialogue. Conqueror 13 noted how the support left him feeling:

I mean, my mom. I had everybody in my ear because I don't come from an average home. I got a good family. I had everybody in my ear. What played a big part in it is basically my brother and my mom. My Mom love me, this, and that, but when I do something she like call me a "Dumb A" or something like that. It just hurts me so I take all of the pain off me and put it on somebody else, the best I can.

Conqueror 13 continues by offering insight into his other "family" when asked if gangs were a danger or threat:

I mean, no, because when you don't got nobody I would say that they are there. But, if you get in trouble with them, they not there. But, when you don't got nobody, they gonna be there...I wouldn't call what I was in a gang; I would call it a family. Cause they never like pushed me to do what real gangs do, you know - steal or nothing.

The dynamics contained in the major support lacking theme are encouraging to the discipline of education, as the resolve and resiliency of participants begins to gain in transparency. The presence of and support from more knowledgeable others in the life of

participants is the goal; however, the desired educational support the participant craves is from teachers. Implication from the interviews is a strong desire exists from participants for willing educators to regain the role of trusted guide and lead struggling learners within the classroom. The participants remain hopeful to obtain or sustain a trusted guide by their side during the remainder of the educational process. Tense feelings were noted during the interviews as confidences for more knowledgeable others (MKO) to willingly assume that role with consistency is suspect. The outcry for more adult support to either help get on or sustain the track to graduation is a major development.

Theme V: Engaging At-risk Behavior

Participant reasons for appearing before hearing boards are captured into two distinct behavioral categories – major offenses and intermediate offenses. Major offenses are safety violations or criminal misconduct. Intermediate offenses are considered higher than minor offenses primarily because of volume of occurrence.

Of the 45 reported instances, 34 (76%) are categorized as offenses that could lead to criminal charges. The two non-criminal categories represent behavioral misgivings of disrespect, disobedience, disruption, and defiance in the school environment; 11 (24%) of the 45 reasons for appearing before the hearing board are represented in the non-criminal category. Only five (31%) of participants did not have a non-criminal behavior as a catalyst for disciplinary review; three participants reacted to bullying (fighting), one fought for an undisclosed reason, and one harassed and assaulted another student.

The prevailing reason for hearing board appearances was fighting where participants escalated their behavior beyond the conflict to a higher risk reason for expulsion and possible attrition. Conqueror 5 reacted to having a pen thrown at him by punching another student in the chest. Conqueror 9 elevated his disruptive behavior to actions that could result in criminal charges by participating in multiple fights and stabbing a teacher with a pencil. Conqueror 13 accepted blame and offered a vague account of his actions: “Basically, (I was) just being blatantly disrespectful, fighting, gang-related.”

A finding common throughout the research beginning with the first national longitudinal study that included African Americans, National Longitudinal Study of Youth Labor Market Experience of 1979 (BLS, 2005), was the high rate of expulsions or suspensions among African Americans. The attrition study confirmed sustainment of the usual slate of distractions – drugs, fighting, youthfully ignorant behavior (calling in a bomb threat), and peer pressure to violate existing policy. However, the dominant distraction recorded in interviews presents the greatest academic threat to African American youth – bullying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Cumulative reasons for expulsion captured in participant experiences and perceptions with at-risk behaviors that lead to event dropout may point to reasons for concern – feelings of being disconnected. A participant bored with school partakes in drugs. A participant tries to fit in with peers, admits to not taking school seriously, yet gets caught trying to hide a pellet gun on school property to cover for the peer who brought the gun on campus. Teacher will not address participant’s fears for being placed in a mainstream class and participant intentionally skips class until expelled. Participant pressured in class by classmates, disappointed with teacher’s lack of control of class, constantly bullied, and becomes the aggressor fighting the bully. Participant creates a tough persona to ward off potential bullies. All the behaviors are counterproductive to good order, discipline, and learning.

Theme VI: Apathetic View of Education

Two perspectives on education were revealed from participant experiences: pre-hearing board and post-hearing board. The attending school experience in general and the perspective on how participants felt regarding their teachers in specific were dominant thoughts in response to interview questions referencing problems preventing education and the learning environment. Conqueror 4 is a two-time repeater, a student required to take a grade over again before advancing to the next level, who lost interest in school and stopped taking education seriously, along with a group of friends harboring like feelings:

I really did like school, until it seemed like I never could get it right. Seems like everything started getting harder and harder. And it felt like I never wanted to learn anything from school anymore. I was just tired of school.

Conqueror 15, self-described as depressed, angry, and disappointed, shared:

But my low points – just not being in school knowing I’m missing my education, knowing I need it. Not really taking responsibility for my actions at that time...whenever I use to get in trouble, I use to blame it on everybody else.

Conqueror 9 reacted to expulsion with feelings of shame, further stating “...all my charges have been assault charges. Nothing else, no burglary; I don’t steal.” He could not discern any high points from his time away from school, but thoughts of having to stay back a grade were low points.

Most participants were able to stay connected with friends during the expulsion period through various means. Conqueror 4 noted, “When they got out of school, I made sure I went to their house.” Conqueror 16 had a similar routine where “we would just chill and play a game or something like that, or we would just go to the gym and hang out.” Conqueror 5 witnessed a slight tightening of controls and less freedom of movement as the period of his expulsion lengthened:

I only went to a friend’s house about once a week. Cause I started getting use to going to their home. Mom use to call me back saying, come on it’s getting late. Then she said, you been over there too late, and you can’t go over there now. I used to stay out until about nine, knowing they had school tomorrow and everything.

Use of technology was also a factor in maintaining contact with friends during expulsion. Participants were heavily engaged in social media during the disciplinary period. The most common technology of choice was text messages. Conquerors 11 and 14 experienced no depreciable constraints on texting. Conqueror 1 engaged in a wider suite of media tools, proclaiming to use “Face Time, on Snap Chat, Facebook Messenger, texting, calling – all of that!” Conqueror 13 had access to social media, but offered an interesting perspective:

It was like a stab in your heart. Cause every day, you know how social media is; it’s just terrible. I was just scrolling down social media and I see everybody taking pictures in the school, having fun in the school. I be like dang if I didn’t get in trouble, if I didn’t get in trouble I’d be there. I’d be there.

Scaffolding is an ongoing support cooperative between an expert and learner. Zero instances of scaffolding were reported as occurring prior to participant behavioral troubles resulting in hearing board appearances and expulsion decisions. However, there were detailed scaffolding experiences following board appearances, ultimately triggering the transformation process clearing the way to graduating. Participants appeared more open to varying levels of assistance from experienced others after receiving discipline.

Theme VII: Motivation Is the Education Multiplier

Participants revealed the turning point for the attrition experience ranged from the moment of disciplinary board decision to more substantive personal accounts concerning self, friends, or parents. Although numerous participants identified the board decision declaring wrongdoing as the defining moment during the attrition experience, disappointment in self and family dominated the personal revelations of participant experiences. Conqueror 5 offered the following perspective and summation: “I was disappointed in myself, and most of me started being disappointed in my family...Mom and Dad because they weren’t there to help out. Probably could have did a lot more, you know. So most of it was disappointment.”

The stern actions of parents, specifically Mom, defined the attrition turning point for two participants. Conqueror 11 referred to “Mom crying” as being the catalyst. Conqueror 13 spoke of being kicked out of the house by the family matriarch as the reality check for him.

I would say when I noticed that my Momma kicked me out because nobody thinks that their Momma gonna kick them out. I was standing there like she ain't gonna kick me out, she loves me too much...So, I was like, oh well, if you kick me out, I know what to do... my exact words were, if you kick me out I'm just gonna sell drugs...Then I realized I'm not built for that life. That was my turning point when I noticed that she kicked me out; I thought it was a big dream.

Participant descriptions of the education benefits to staying in school were completely positive. Participants experienced or perceived various turning points that may contribute to improving quality of life transcending three stages of educational development: foundational (stability from gaining confidence, giving, and receiving respect), intermediate (secondary education opportunities), and post-graduation (opportunities following high school). Conqueror 6 received inspiration from a teacher who took a personal interest in setting him on a path to early graduation. The foundation for his renewed confidence and spark for education is expressed below:

Oh, I hate being away from school. Even on the weekends, I hate it cause knowing that I am now graduating early and that I actually like school and taking my classes on the computer or whatever. When I went home, or if we have Winter Break, Spring Break – I hate it! Like, it gives me this type of anxiety, like I have to be at school. So, then when I do come to school, I am so happy and joyful. Like, during the summer I'm coming to an impact program; I can't stay away from school.

Immediate benefits to education were the most obvious to participants and covered a broader range – participate in high school athletics, obtain diploma, opportunity to develop a skill, or opportunity to partake in post-secondary education. Conqueror 5 conveys:

Because nowadays you can't do nothing, mostly nothing in this world without a high school diploma. The job my dad has he can't even do that without a high school diploma. And I don't want to work at no McDonalds and stuff.

Three participants who did not communicate any of the four immediate benefits noted a benefit to remaining in school and graduating is the resulting educational appeal in the job market. Nine (56%) of the participants recognized the economic appeal and hopes for a better future as postgraduates. Conqueror 6 contributed an idealistic perspective regarding the economic appeal and hopes for a better future as post-graduates: "More opportunities in life. Better jobs. Probably more people you could trust, that can fit in right around you."

In summary, the various turning points proved inspirational for participants, becoming meaning units linking motivation to benefits to education. Participants were motivated to pursue additional opportunities to claim the benefits of remaining in school, an observation shared by Morrissette (2018) in his account of early leavers returning to high school to pursue their dreams of a better life through education. The theme, motivation is the education multiplier, was inspired by the connection perceptions of education benefits have on defining moments in the lives of participants relative to graduation.

Theme VIII: Respect Is Key to Graduation

Participant lessons learned were consistently about respect. Respect is integral to the education system, and respect has multifaceted dimensions in education that may be instrumental in improving graduation rates. One hundred percent of participants mentioned an aspect of respect from experiences within the education system. Conquerors seemed to agree disruptions in the classroom were disrespectful to the institution, learners, and educators. A shared lesson learned among many participants was to keep the educational process simple, as communicated in advice from Conqueror 11: "Go to school. Do what I gotta do. Don't follow nobody up." Conqueror 5 declared, "This experience taught me that the education system ain't no joke, and I need to go ahead and get it and get on through before I be left back on my butt again. And I don't need that."

The institution of education may be a partner capable of dispensing consequences as alluded to by Conqueror 9 when sharing lessons learned from education system experiences: "Taught me that the education system, it will be your friend, but it will do what it has to do if you act up too bad. If you too much in school, it's gonna put you out – no hesitation."

Conqueror 4 emphasized the need for a symbiotic relationship with the education system: "That you can't take it for granted. You need it. We gotta present like every black male need their education – every black male."

Concerns were expressed how respecting each other, including teachers showing respect for students was essential. Conqueror 1's expectation was for teachers to treat him properly and even offered a definition of respect to be "Not being smart with me when I'm not being smart with them." Conqueror 2 expressed a personal evolution from experiencing treatment like what Conqueror 1 described and now having teachers who present a totally different approach: "I do my work because it's (treatment by teachers) better. Because I get like help, and they actually sit there and tell me how to do it."

Respecting the institution where teachers are employed may be equally important as respecting the teachers who are expected to provide quality service to students. Conqueror 13 recognized showing respect to each other helps to create a learning environment conducive to positive educational outcomes by stating a student's responsibility is to seek assistance, even if the first teacher is unwilling to provide the base standard of care:

It's (the education system) important, and people don't have to be here if they don't want to, so just take advantage of them (teachers) and let them help you as if they want to. But if they don't want to help you, go to somebody that really wants to.

Conqueror 7 shared the same spirited refrain:

You don't go to school to play around. If you don't want to go to school, then just don't go to school. Be a dummy, but people want to go to school to learn. Get your education. Live a good life. Be rich.

In summary, in-depth participant interviews revealed how second chances emerge when maturity and self-motivation allow respect to permeate the learning environment through multiple stakeholders. Respect and second chances become catalysts to reap the benefits of remaining in school and earning a diploma. The self-described lessons learned – respect to self, respect to others, respect the educational institution – indicate a desire to be more respectful and demand respect in return. A clearer distinction from the results of the study on attrition setting it apart from previous research is the blatant social and emotional disconnect in learning and application between participants and educators. Participants recognize a void in the relationships with teachers and, to a lesser degree, administrators. Participants as a majority desire a high school diploma. Every participant has grown to understand benefits to attaining a diploma exist. Participants conveyed a desire to matriculate and not return to event dropout status.

Discussion

The macro focus of previous research was essential for identifying the need to improve dropout rates in general. Past strategies proved effective in increasing graduation rates across all races. Unfortunately, growth gaps increased among the most vulnerable demographic, African American males. Descriptive phenomenological research set this study apart from its predecessors as lived experiences of participants added a micro perspective to attrition inequities.

The horizons, textural-structural descriptions, and invariant constituents of the phenomenon of attrition were clustered into eight major themes relevant to the central research question and three sub-questions of the study. African American males in this study exhibited a wide range of feelings regarding the school climate, expectations of the education system, and support from more knowledgeable others (MKO). Most of those feelings appeared negative: annoyed, vulnerable, bitter, guarded, tense, and lack confidence in MKO.

Resilience is the defining essence. The caution, and sincere belief, of what makes the African American male subgroup resilient is those same negative feelings just noted are countered with feelings of inspiration, engagement, and excitement about the motivation of self and others, respect for self and others, and sharing the responsibility for transforming expectations regarding their education. Their outlook was sparked by a high degree of enthusiasm and joy for the prospect of now being able to graduate high school. The level of persistence it takes for young people who have experienced the phenomenon of attrition to evoke positive emotions, predominantly, reflects favorably on their resiliency and potential to overcome and stay fixed on a graduation trajectory.

Barriers to graduation took on a more personal perspective than previous research. This study emphasized a lack of stakeholder support, failure to address at-risk behavior, and an apathetic view of education as barriers to African American males graduating. The African

American males in this study were hopeful and grateful for social and emotional learning (SEL) skills development in themselves and the more knowledgeable others encountered at home and in the educational institutions. This troubled subgroup also feels disconnected and engages in at-risk behavior at an elevated rate. The group also displayed an apathetic view of education in general while admittedly having a dislike (and in a lesser regard, emotional hatred) for teachers and some administrators. Although the disdain captured in the lived experiences is largely event driven (linked to the reason for attrition experiences), the concern underscores the need for team support from all stakeholder groups to bridge the attrition gap in education.

The primary implication of the descriptive phenomenological study is educating African American males takes a collaborative effort from stakeholders. Results of the study indicate a strong desire for retention among the subgroups. Analysis of the two data points – need for stakeholder collaboration and desire for retention – reveal the void that must be filled to ensure the achievement and opportunity gaps in the lagging African American male demographic.

Vulnerabilities are exploited by the appeal of negative influences at a time when social and emotional learning are not skillsets owned by learners, and in many cases, not apparent or utilized by adult stakeholders to engage African American males in the pursuit of an education. The result is negative influences covering a broad range of misbehavior, drug use, and gang activity get a place of prominence in the lives of promising young people. Students fall behind in education and are often labeled as distractions, troublemakers, or even dropouts. Unable to cope, some may even give in to the influences of peers or give up on trying to get caught up.

The ending of the cycle begins with unmasking the barriers that lead to dropout rates in the African American male subgroup. The barriers are not the reasons participants in the study were expelled from school, which is a distinct difference from past studies where low-income students, dropout factories, intergenerational poverty, and discipline inequity were dominant reasons for dropping out. The barriers conveyed in this study were framed around social and emotional competence: stakeholders' support was lacking, not engaging at-risk behavior, and apathetic view of education. Stakeholders – parents, educators, learners, communities – taking an active stand to embrace the real barriers to education is the catalyst that gives the lagging demographic under study the confidence and perspective to bridge gaps in education and stay on the path to societal success.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills mastery is central to transforming school climate and SEL (Osher & Berg, 2017). Stakeholders must take a collaborative approach to education through the lens and mastery of self-awareness and social interaction, a common declaration and major factor for the success of participants in this study. A successful SEL program is key to developing a school climate and culture that respects others and leaves learners focused, equipped, and motivated to sustain education for a lifetime. Deliberately compensating for barriers and stakeholders' strengthening SEL skills will further pave the way to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps currently lagging in the African American demographic. Expect, at a minimum, increased graduation rates among minorities, greater tax contributions as more populaces qualify for the workforce, less reliance on government healthcare, lower rates of criminal activity, and less reliance on welfare.

The significance of this study to leadership should be taken in the study's entirety. Educators are entrusted with the educational development of all demographic subgroups. Regardless of the demographic that is off pace with the rest, leaders within the discipline of education must take notice. During a time when graduation rates are at a record high, the fact subgroups are lagging with keeping pace is a matter of importance.

Educational leadership covers a broad spectrum in the discipline. The study uniquely explored attrition and associated barriers to meeting societal educational goals. The study

recognized the desire for improving graduation rates and offered to extend beyond that goal into developing paths to success.

The study finding on school climate addressed the need to create an environment conducive to learning. Results indicate a shortfall in the African American male subgroup as learners were not consistently and proactively engaged by educators and in some cases administrators. Outreach appeared to only return once placed in an alternative learning environment. Participants were not even provided homework while in a waiting status for hearing board results, sometimes more than 90-days in duration. Perceptions of school climate matter when a subgroup feels pushed out of the education system.

Social and emotional learning as a skill is a value-added component of the education system. Although the fact may not be shocking, what educational leaders need to be aware of is lack of mastery in adults is detrimental to young people when adults are either incapable or unwilling to use the skills to engage and direct learners in the pursuit of educational goals. SEL skill mastery will help give educational leaders the confidence to connect with every learner and maximize the learning experience for all concerned.

The results of the study provided significant insights about the perceived engagement and disengagement between educators and African American males when social and emotional skills were not maximized in an educational environment. The results of the study were not limited to social and emotional shortcomings in learners, but revealed, at a minimum, unwillingness, or incapability of adult educational leaders to engage learners socially and emotionally in the promotion of educational goal attainment. Future research to explore the perspective of the educational leader in engaging at-risk minorities is warranted.

Quantitative research in the major theme areas may present opportunities to further research. Survey results concerning current school climate, especially as society is faced with growing concerns about school safety and mental health, may be worthy of research relative to educational achievement and opportunities. More research is needed in SEL development in the context of assessing the ability to manage and cope with conflict surrounding school safety, possibly with a focus on any of the aspects of bullying. Another area of future study is to focus on the educators' perspective on their own preparedness in SEL in being able to engage others in a learning environment. Research to discern strategies to engage youth perceived or determined to be at-risk also has merit.

Interpretation of findings and findings connecting the research study to *Learning Theory in Education* and *Social Development Theory* revealed results relevant to advancing educational leadership and social and emotional learning skills development for all stakeholders in the discipline of education. Results detailed a consistency with past research and offered key recommendations to specifically engage the lagging African American male subgroup and narrow the achievement and opportunity gaps that currently exist. As an educator, parent, life-long learner, and community leader I was relatively surprised with the depth of SEL disconnection participants noted between stakeholders at this point in history.

Limitations of this Study

Transcendental phenomenological reduction is the process of discerning the essence(s) of a phenomenon. Data was obtained from open-ended interviews of 16 African American males' descriptions of lived experiences with attrition in high school in the United States region of South Carolina. The reduction procedures were initiated and sustained to transform the researcher from a natural attitude to a phenomenological attitude and reveal the phenomenon of attrition, mitigating bias and suspending judgment. Textural and structural meanings were synthesized from the descriptions of experiences as intuitive integration adding meaning to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). These efforts to promote trustworthiness and credibility were

enacted with the highest level of rigor. Regardless, the subjective nature of the research is acknowledged as a human condition.

The results of the study may not be generalizable. Although the targeted location and demographic were chosen because the lags are distinct, other factors were not considered as a scope of the study. The targeted group was event dropouts, students who left school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a diploma or equivalent graduation credential. The study did not seek dropouts who chose to never return to pursue graduation credentials.

One limitation may have also been the absence of participants in the Hispanic male subgroup. The demographic shares similar achievement and opportunity gaps in education. However, there were no potential participants who chose to respond to recruitment efforts.

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