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A Phenomenological Study of African American Males Who Drop Out

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Adrianna Davis

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of African American Males Who Drop Out

by

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MS, University of Miami, 1991

BS, Tuskegee University, 1987

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2015

Abstract

Although school districts in Florida have reported a decrease in the overall dropout rate, the dropout rate among African American males remains higher than it does for any other ethnic group. Guided by Ogbu's oppositional culture theory, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the high dropout rate among African American males and determine some of the social, cultural, educational, and economic elements that may hinder African American males from completing high school. A purposive sample of 10 African American males who dropped out of high school and who were between the ages of 18 and 35 was selected to participate in this study. Thirty open-ended interviews were conducted, and the data were analyzed using an open coding system. Twelve themes emerged that provided evidence of the complex factors associated with dropping out. The major themes included lack of motivation from parents and teachers, disengagement from the educational institution, economic challenges related to poverty, and peer influence. It is recommended that programs and curricula be developed and implemented that would create opportunities to build positive relationships between African American male students and their teachers, parents, and peers. Positive social change could occur with an increase in the graduation rate of African American male students, which would offer a more educated work force for the community.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my doctoral study to Alex. For without his continued support and encouragement I could not have completed this process.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, African American males face many obstacles that prevent them from completing high school. According to Jackson (2010), “during the 2007-2008 school year only 47% of the African American male students graduated with their cohort” (p. 6). In northern Florida, among all students eligible to graduate during the 2012-2013 school year, 41.1% of African American males failed to meet graduation requirements as compared to 23.3% of nongraduating European American males (Florida Department of Education [FDOE], 2013). The FDOE reported that the dropout rate for African Americans in northern Florida during the 2012 to 2013 school year was 34.1%, which eclipsed the dropout rate for European American males in the state of Florida. Although the dropout rate in northern Florida is 4.3% less than the national rate, there is still a need and attention as to the various factors that lead African American males to drop out of the public school system. African American males encounter many obstacles that prevent them from matriculating from the ninth to the 12th grade and from graduating from high school.

The dropout rate among African American males in northern Florida is increasing despite the implementation of programs to lower this rate. The Florida Department of Education (2013) reported that behavior issues, suspensions, low grades, and poor attendance were some of the fundamental reasons that contributed to the high dropout rate among African American males. Although there has been much debate concerning the formula used to calculate the dropout rate in northern Florida, the dropout rate

continues to rise, and fewer African-American males obtain a high school diploma each school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In the state of Florida, graduation rates are calculated by estimating the total number of students that would be entering high school as freshmen and the total number of diplomas that would be issued after 4 years (Education Information & Accountability Services Data Report [EIASDR], 2012). Ogbu (2003) noted that there is a significant gap in academic achievement when comparisons are made between African American students and European American students. Although districts use different methods to calculate the dropout rate, the numbers continue to show a gap between the graduation rates of African American males as compared to males of other ethnic groups.

African American males who have failed to complete high school have limited potential for future success. Dropouts cost communities and municipalities money because they are more likely to depend on government assistance. Whitaker (2010) reported that dropouts earn less than workers with diplomas and they are more likely to depend on public assistance programs. Failure to obtain a high school diploma often leads to incarceration or justice system problems. Whitaker reported that 75% of incarcerated African Americans lack a high school credential. Analysis of public assistance programs, and the inmate population statistics show that African-American males represent the majority and that most of them lack a high school education.

When African American males fail to graduate from high school, the communities that they live in have fewer productive citizens, and the overall workforce decreases

(Campbell, 2015). Educators and policy makers must work to develop programs that would increase the high school retention rates of African American male students. The high dropout rate among African American male students is troubling in a society that emphasizes educating all students.

Each year school districts throughout the state of Florida report a dropout problem among African American males. The Florida Department of Education (2013) defined a dropout as “a student who withdraws from school for any of several reasons without transferring to another school, home education program, or adult education program” (p. 5). The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) stated that “the status dropout rate is the percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential” (para. 1). Although different terms are used, the term dropout applies to any person who fails to complete high school or a program that awards a high school diploma. The high rate of failure of African American males to complete high school creates many problems and risks for their future such as lower paying jobs and potential incarceration. In order to prevent African American males from making the choice to drop out, specialized attention may be required that addresses their educational needs public schools. Section 2 provides insight into some of the reasons that students fail to obtain a high school credential.

Problem Statement

In public schools in northern Florida, there is a high dropout rate and poor academic achievement among African American male students. According to the Florida Department of Education (2014), 34.1% of the African American males who were enrolled in a high school program during the 2012-2013 academic year dropped out. One reason for the high dropout rate may be acts of exclusionary practices that lead African American males to develop a sense of disengagement and create a negative perception of the educational system (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010). African American males who are frequently suspended or expelled usually develop attitudes of academic disengagement, increased association with rebellious peers, develop resentment to school authorities, and a sense of being alienated (Watson, 2011). These elements all play a role in the lives of African American male students and may be important in leading them to drop out of school. Current federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school reforms, rigorous curricula, and highly qualified teachers have failed to decrease the dropout rate among African American males. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address the local dropout problem among African American males by examination of their school experiences.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted with African American male students who attended a high school program in a public school in northern Florida, but who dropped out before receiving a high school credential. The 10 participants who were selected by

purposive sampling were African American males between the ages of 18 and 35 who entered a public school program in the ninth grade and who dropped out without completing a high school credential. Face-to-face interviews (during private meetings) and telephone interviews (with those who were unavailable for face-to-face interviews) were used for data collection. The interviews were conducted at times that were convenient for the participants. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. The phenomenon of each individual's experience was the focus of the inquiry to identify the elements responsible for him choosing to drop out of high school.

Research Questions

Qualitative studies have research questions that are open-ended and evolving. Creswell (2009) suggested that undertaking a phenomenological approach requires the researcher first to determine the broadest question that may be asked to gain insight into personal experiences. Several questions were used to investigate the dropout problem among African American males in public schools in North Florida, the main question was the following: What specific experiences influenced the African American male's decision to drop out of a public high school in northern Florida? The following additional research questions were asked:

1. What social, cultural, educational and economic elements contribute to African American male students dropping out of school?
2. What role did the relationships among African American males and school officials have in influencing them to drop out of school?

3. What common perceptions are identified among African American male students that drop out?

These questions helped to guide this study and provided information in order to assist stakeholders in addressing the dropout problem in northern Florida public schools. A more detailed explanation of this study is presented in Section 3, Methodology.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the experiences undergone by male African American students in the environment of public schools in northern Florida with a primary objective of identifying common perceptions that lead these students to drop out. Influences within the school environment, such as practices and procedures, that affect the decision of African American males choosing to drop out of schools in northern Florida were also examined. The findings of the study revealed useful information for teachers, educational stakeholders, and community leaders that could lead to the implementation of programs that would be effective in decreasing the dropout rate among African American male students.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study was based on Ogbu's (2003) oppositional cultural theory, which focused on the school experiences of African Americans. Ogbu studied phenomena involving the ethnic differences in educational and economic achievement among different races. Ogbu (1991, 2003) focused on the problems faced by African Americans in the educational system explained some of the

perceptions of African American males in the school environment. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) “African American students perform poorly academically because they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance” (p. 177). These students are not confident enough in their intellectual abilities and begin to believe that they do not belong in the school setting.

Schooling and education in many African American communities are perceived negatively due to various social issues and peer pressure. A disconnection from educational institutions develops when African American males who are at risk of dropping out are faced with choosing social acceptance or educational achievement. Fordham and Ogbu discovered that “ambivalence, affective dissonance, and social pressures, hinder African-American students who may be academically able from putting forth the necessary effort and perseverance needed to complete schoolwork” (p. 177). These factors consequently lead them to do poorly in school. Wright, Weeks, and McLaughlin (as cited in Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012) found that “African American students’ beliefs about self and race are closely related to (a) their educational and social development, (b) their perceptions regarding the value of education, and (c) to their current realities” (p. 201). The high school environment is a different and new experience for each individual, but for African American males in particular, the transition is not always comfortable.

These students must cope with entering an unfamiliar environment, new people, new friends, and new school rules. Ogbu (2003) believed that African Americans were

forced into conforming to an educational setting of a culture that was different from their own. African American male students often find the new changes and the transition difficult to analyze and, therefore, new perceptions are formulated that shape his experiences in the new environment. When African American males enter the high school environment for the first time, they bring with them their personal beliefs and perceptions that are often different from the expectations and norms practiced by other races. African Americans may have internalized their discrimination from other races, which led them to develop a different and distinct culture of their own (Magino, 2013). Ogbu (2013) termed this way of thinking as oppositional cultural identity. The combination of personal beliefs, personal experiences, and perceptions all play a role in the high school experience for the African American male student. Misjudgment, misunderstanding, and a lack of guidance often lead African American males to the decision to drop out. The conceptual framework was appropriate for this study because participant responses were used to analyze, explain, and interpret the reasons why African American males choose to leave school without a high school credential.

Definition of Terms

Terms used throughout this study are defined as follows:

African American students: “Students of African descent born in the United States of America” (Holzman, 2008, p. 2).

Dropout: The Florida Department of Education (2013) defined a dropout as “a student who withdraws from school for any of several reasons without transferring to another school, home education program, or adult education program” (p. 5).

Graduate: A graduate is defined as a student who completes all high school requirements to receive a high school diploma (Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

School year: The 12-month period beginning on the first day of school “in which dropouts from the previous summer reported for the year and grade in which they fail to enroll” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, para. 18).

Traditional school: The Florida Department of Education (2013) defined a traditional school as any public school that offers a conventional education and adheres to the policies of the state department of education.

Assumptions

The data collection process was based on the assumptions that the participants in the study would agree to provide their opinions openly, honestly, and without bias. The quality of the data collected was rated based on the assumption that the data collected were purely truthful and a real representation of the events in the school environment. Deliberate efforts were made to conduct the research in an unbiased fashion. During the data collection, the participants were not forced into giving me any false or exaggerated information; therefore, the data represented the feelings and experiences of the participants in their words and voice.

Limitations

The study was conducted using a purposive sample of African American males who dropped out of school after entering the ninth grade and who did not complete the requirements to graduate. I relied on the memory of the participants who dropped out of the public school program several years ago. As a result, some of the participants were unable to remember accurately some of the experiences that they had in school that contributed to them choosing to drop out of school. Researcher bias, as well as misinterpretations of data and participant responses, could affect the results of this study due to its qualitative nature. My role as the researcher was a limitation due to my previous experiences as an alternative school educator. To resolve these limitations and researcher bias, I ensured that the participant responses were counter checked by an independent party. Such actions reduced the probability of bias in this study.

Delimitations

As the researcher, I imposed the following delimitations to narrow the focus of study:

1. This research was confined to the experiences of adult African American males who dropped out of public schools in northern Florida.
2. I focused on African American males who dropped out after entering the ninth grade and did not complete high school.

Furthermore, this study was not intended to provide generalizable findings. Rather, the aim of this qualitative research was to derive meaning. The themes in this

study were derived from the interviews and the data analysis conducted. These generated themes may be the basis for future research on this topic. It was expected that the information obtained would shed light on the common perceptions and school experiences among African American male students that cause them to drop out.

Significance of the Study

There is a significant dropout problem in schools all over the United States. Over the past several years, national attention has been given to the high school dropout rate in the United States (Jackson, 2010). Through this study analysis, I identified the various reasons why African American males are unsuccessful in completing high school.

The information gathered in this study can be valuable to educators and district leaders who are responsible for formulating plans and creating curricula. This information may also assist school leaders with creating prevention programs that would decrease the high dropout rate among African American males in educational institutions throughout the state of Florida. The analysis of this study could be used to promote social changes that would give educators insight to how students who are at risk of dropping out, particularly African American males, perceive the school environment, and thereby help them to develop better programs. The information obtained from this study could also be used to target current African American male students who display signs of dropping out. The data that emerged from this study may help reduce or eliminate some of the factors that may drive African American males to drop out of school.

The findings of this research would be shared with school personnel in northern Florida to increase dialog regarding the dropout problem among African American males. It will also provide faculty, educational administrators, and school officials with insights into the African American male school experience from the perspective of the students themselves. This research may assist in the development of programs that would reduce dropout rates.

Summary

Some public schools in north Florida fail to meet the needs of African American male students and provide them with the support that they need to obtain a high school credential. After many African American males enter the ninth grade, they fail to stay in school until graduation (Jackson, 2010). In this study, I uncovered some of the common perceptions that are involved when African American male students choose to drop out before completing high school. The data from this qualitative study may be of value to teachers and administrators and could assist them in creating programs and interventions that would benefit at-risk African American male students who attend public schools in northern Florida.

The intended outcome of this study was to provide stakeholders and policy makers with information and insight into the dropout problem and provide information from the experiences and perspectives of this at risk group. Williams, Ernst, and Kaui (2015) reported that “the term at-risk is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a high likelihood of failing academically or dropping

out of school” (p. 41). Dropping out is a complicated issue that could affect individuals for the rest of their lives. Therefore, this subject matter is of utmost importance. Because the continuity of society relies on the productiveness of youth, the lack of educated, productive, African American males will have long-term lasting effects in the future and on the communities in which they live.

Section 2 includes a literature review on examined elements relating to the school environment within public schools. Section 2 includes a review of current research that addressed the dropout problem among African American male students nationwide. Section 3 includes the research methods used in the study. I also discuss the context of the study, participant selection, and data analysis. In Section 4, the interpretation of the results and the quality of evidence of the study is discussed. The last section presents recommendations for implementation and further research, as well as a summary and conclusion of the findings of this study.

Section 2: Literature Review

In this section, I present the historical background on dropouts. After giving a brief history on the dropout problem, the current methods of computing dropout rates and the types of data sources used is presented. Next, the possible reasons why students, particularly African American males, choose to drop out of school is discussed. Some of the problems leading to an increased risk of dropping out were classified into three categories: individual or student level factors, institutional or school level factors, and, student engagement factors. The impact of each category on the dropout rate is also presented. Ogbu's (2003) oppositional cultural theory provides additional information concerning the reasons why African American males drop out. I also highlight the attitudes that dropouts develop from leaving school. Subsequently, a discussion of the recommended interventions to decrease the rate of dropping out is presented. Additional studies were included on policy recommendations to reduce the dropout rate and to assist high school dropouts' transition into the workforce. A short discussion of the methodology that was used in this study is also included. The summary of this chapter is a discussion of the relationship of this study to the previous research.

Information obtained from books, journals, and research databases such as ProQuest and EBSCO, search engines such as Google Scholar, and the Walden University research library were used in the investigation of this study. The following keywords were used: *African American male dropouts*, *African American male dropout rates*, *high school dropout rates*, and *graduation rates*, *graduation rates of Blacks in*

Florida, African American male exclusion, alternative school demographics, and high school graduation rates. Much of the information used in this section was obtained via The Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which is an institution that generates peer-reviewed studies and publishes books regarding civil rights and equal opportunities across racial and ethnic groups. Besides academic journals, other sources such as books and nonjournal articles from The Civil Rights Project database was used to provide a more comprehensive review. Several authors such as Ogbu (2003) and the oppositional culture theory were used to provide insight related to the dropout rate among African American males. Ogbu's principles formed the conceptual framework for the study. Campbell and Sherington (2013) provided insight into the history of public school institutions and the importance of education. U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration (2008) provided economic statistics as evidence for the financial impact of dropping out. Zablocki (2009) provided the logical organization to the possible reasons why students drop out. Statistical figures, retrieved from nonjournal sources, were also used. Figures and interpretations from Child Trends Data Bank (2011) were used in this review to give a background on the historical trends of dropping out, as well as to give concrete figures on the gaps between different races.

Historical Trend of Dropping Out

In the United States, particularly in the state of Florida, African American male students face many obstacles that prevent them from graduating from high school

(FDOE, 2012; FDOE, 2013). Many of these students drop out for various reasons, including behavior issues, which may lead to suspensions, low grades, and poor attendance (Florida Department of Education, 2013). The trend of dropping out has been noted historically and has been increasing throughout the years (Ogbu, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Ogbu (2003) pointed out that this trend has been consistent regardless of the methods used to calculate dropout rates; the numbers continue to show a gap between graduation rates of African-American males and males of other racial groups, particularly European Americans.

The high dropout rate poses a problem not only for the dropout himself, but also for the communities in which he resides. Without a high school certification, African American male dropouts have limited potential for future success and oftentimes become incarcerated (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). They also have a higher likelihood to be unemployed and to have physical and mental health problems (Childs Trends Data Bank, 2011; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Dropouts cost taxpayers money because these citizens end up in costly public assistance programs (Whitaker, 2010). The dropout problem also causes an increase in crime rates in communities (Childs Trends Data Bank, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The high dropout rate of African American males adversely affects their lives and threatens economic growth and productivity. Because it has been established that minority groups, particularly African Americans, are more likely to drop out of school as opposed to European Americans (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Kohli, 2012; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Noltemeyer &

Mcloughlin, 2010; Ogbu, 2003; Royal & Lamport, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), solutions must be created by educators and policy makers that would prevent African American students from dropping out of school. The disparities that exist between the dropout rate for African American males and European American males is significant in a society where education is the foundation for living a successful life.

Historical Background of Dropouts

History on school dropouts can be traced back to the late 1920s (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). It was then labeled as “school leaving,” and the term was associated with those with possible mental inferiority (Doll et al., 2013). This was an unspecific term used for any student who decided to leave school for any reason, most popularly to join the workforce (Doll et al., 2013). Prior to World War II, child labor was a prominent phenomenon, and many children were forced or chose to leave school in order to work (Royal & Lamport, 2012). During that time, people who were unable to obtain a high school credential were able to live as well as those who completed the high school curriculum (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Prior to the 1940s, more than 90% of individuals aged 18 and older who had not finished school were easily employed (Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy, & Kita, 2011; McCall, 2011; Ortega, 2013; Zablocki, 2009). Many students thought that it was more beneficial for them to drop out because they could work and earn a good living. During this period, students were encouraged to drop out from school to assist the family and help with family expenses (Saddler, Tyler,

Cleveland, Maldonado, & Thompson, 2011). Parents encouraged the practice of dropping out in the early 20th century because an education was not necessary in order to achieve financial success (Saddler et al., 2011). The need to finish high school was not as commonplace as it is today.

After World War II, people began to change their ideas concerning the importance of education. High school was a social institution and began to take on the role of refining the youth (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Change in business in the early 1970s caused people's ideas and beliefs about education to change (Campbell & Sherington, 2013). Businesses began to demand that workers become skilled and educated in order to obtain employment. Campbell and Sherington reported that businesses used educational credentials as a screening process to hire competent individuals. When this trend started, the entire field of education was changed. Educators and parents began to emphasize the importance of an education and demand that children strive to obtain a high school diploma in order to get into a good career later on (Campbell & Sherington, 2013). School attendance and garnering a diploma became expected of an adolescent; it became a requirement for future employment.

After World War II, dropouts had existed, but dropping out did not hinder people from making a decent living (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Graduating from school was not deemed as a necessity in order to sustain a family. The National Education Association (NEA) and the U.S. Department of Education defined a dropout as "a student who, with the exception of death, leaves school before graduation and does not transfer to another

school” (Zablocki, 2009, p. 23). Leaving school early adversely affects the lives of dropouts because they encounter more personal challenges and academic difficulties as a result of dropping out (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Dropouts were linked with juvenile delinquency, unemployment, and urban poverty (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Tyler and Lofstrom explained that after World War II, dropouts were seen as nonconformists and had radical ideas, which poisoned the minds of those who still stayed in school. Tyler and Lofstrom reported that there were studies conducted in the 1970s, which claimed that school officials were likely to let these rebellious students leave school to make the school environment more manageable.

Throughout the years, rising wage differentials, determined by a person’s level of educational attainment, fueled the economic incentives for an adolescent to graduate from high school (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Historically, there has been a significant decline in the dropout rate over the last 30 years (Carlson, 2013; Child Trends Data Bank, 2011). Graduation rates have risen to nearly 50% in the past few decades (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). The potential to earn higher wages and achieve financial stability has contributed to the decline in dropout rates.

Despite the overall decline in dropout rates, there is a wide educational attainment gap between races, particularly those of African American and Hispanic American origin and those born outside of the United States (Child Trends Data Bank, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Although dropout rates are declining in schools throughout the U.S., the educational attainment gap between African American students and European

American students has increased marginally. There is conflicting research on whether the dropout rates for European Americans versus other ethnicities, particularly African Americans, have declined or remained unchanged in recent decades (Child Trends Data Bank, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The Child Trends Data Bank reported that males are more likely to drop out than females, and male students are more likely to quit school at an earlier age than female students.

The need for more skilled workers and educated workers has caused a decrease in the number of students who drop out. Dropout rates have declined steadily in the last 4 decades, specifically the range is between 15 and 8% (Childs Trends Data Base, 2011; Lareau, 2011; McCall, 2011; Ortega, 2013; Zablocki, 2009). However, the current overall dropout rates for schools in the United States are between 22 and 25%, and these figures have not significantly changed in recent decades (Lareau, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Wilson, Tanner-Smith, & Lipsey, 2011). The ways in which these dropout rates vary are due to the different definitions, data sources, and data collection methods used by the institution. School officials are uneasy about how accurate and consistent they are at documenting school performance regarding graduation (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). At the national level, dropout rates are calculated using various approaches, which does not fully describe the extent of the dropout phenomenon (Carter, 2012; Zablocki, 2009). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found that the most common source that cites dropout and graduation statistics is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES uses the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Common Core of

Data (CCD) as its sources to determine the yearly the dropout rate (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The CPS has been gathering data for over 30 years and is considered to be the only source that tracks information on the dropouts of both public and private schools nationally (U. S. Department of Education, 2013). It is a survey that is administered monthly to about 50,000 U.S. households with the primary goal of tracking employment trends among noninstitutionalized samples (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). It additionally collects data regarding the educational attainment of every household member (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). There are some ambiguities behind the accuracy of the data, which may slightly obscure the clarity of the trends it reports (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Since its first release, the questionnaire has been revised to accommodate changes in the economic and educational environment. Hence, it is difficult to compare graduation rates due to variations in computation and data sources (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Sampling and non-sampling errors are also one possible source for inaccurate information (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Nonsampling errors may have a particularly high degree for African American rates because this population may have a tendency to be excluded from the sampling frame (Zablocki, 2009). Because the CPS measures individuals in noninstitutionalized populations, this type of sampling coverage that excludes people who are incarcerated, in the armed forces, or have an immigrant status is a source of bias in measuring educational attainment trends (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

While the CPS remains the preferred source for national estimates of dropout and completion rates, inadequate sample sizes fail to provide enough reliable data for educational institutions (Zablocki, 2009). The CCD, on the other hand, is a database that can facilitate state-to-state comparisons on completion rates (Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2009). Warren and Halpern-Manners (2009) described the CCD as a comprehensive source of educational statistics that assesses school and district demographics, completion rates, and dropout rates. Additionally, the database tracks student demographics within each academic institution. The NCES uses the CPS or the CCD in order to provide the following statistics: (a) “event dropout rate,” (b) “status dropout rate” (c) “status completion rate,” and (d) “average freshman graduation rate” (Tyler & Lofstrom 2009, p. 78). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) defined the dropout rate as the number of high school students who drop out between the ages of 15 and 24 and who fail to complete a high school credential. Lastly, the average freshman, specifically ninth grade, graduation rate describes the percentage of public high school students who complete the 4 years of high school and obtain a diploma. Of the four rates, only the average freshman graduation rate uses the CCD. The average freshman graduation rate, therefore, may reflect local rates more accurately and comprehensively because it uses the CCD as its source of information.

The cohort rate is typically not mentioned in research studies; however it is used to determine the number of high school completers during a typical school year. This parameter describes the percentage of students who enter the ninth grade and are

measured 4 years later during their expected time of graduation (Carter, 2012). Unlike the two status rates, this employs a longitudinal design wherein the number of students that drop out before they are able to complete high school can be calculated.

Calculations for yearly dropout rates can be accomplished by using methods such as identifying the event dropout rate and the status rate. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) explained that, generally, between the event dropout rate and the two status rates, the status rates comparatively yield higher rates because it does not take into account when the student dropped out. The status rates refer to students who fail to earn a high school diploma and who failed to enroll in a high school program, regardless of when the student left school. Event dropout rates would yield the lowest rate because it measures the proportion of dropouts within a single year (Zablocki, 2009). Cohort rates would typically yield high rates as well.

Besides the discrepancies between each parameter to measure dropout rates, another factor that accounted for data variation is the inclusion of individuals who have gained the general education development (GED) credential (Carter, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Additionally, all rates, except the status completion rate, excluded those who have taken the GED at any age (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The GED is an 8-hour test that was developed to establish scholastic aptitude equivalence between traditional high school graduates from those who did not complete a high school credential (Heckman & Lafontaine, 2010). Because these individuals are included in the status completion rate, it may be expected that this rate is higher than the actual measure

of students who finish a traditional high school. Inclusion of the GED-certified individuals in samples distorts statistics on high school graduation rates and differences between rates among ethnicities (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Additionally, the program also encourages some students to drop out of school (Heckman & Lafontaine, 2010). This distinction between those who have completed traditional high school and those who have a GED credential is relevant due to the inequalities in their post high school outcomes (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). For instance, GED holders are less able to get into college than are regular high school graduates. They also consistently have a harder time gaining employment and often have lower wages. Given these inequalities, it would not be just to treat GED holders as graduates in educational reports (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Inclusion of GED holders would not accurately reflect the true proportion of traditional high school graduates.

One of the educational statistics that is affected by dropout rates is the graduation rate. Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) evaluated the different methods used to calculate graduation rates, completion rates, and dropout rates in high schools in the United States. One of their key findings was that the true graduation rate is significantly lower than widely reported measures of 88%. Heckman and LaFontaine found that, depending on the data sources, definitions, and methods used, the current graduation rates in the United States ranges from 66% to 88%. For minority populations, the estimate is from 60% to 85% (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2010). After reconciling the data gathered, Heckman and LaFontaine found that about 65% of African American students graduate and that the

graduation rate for these races were substantially lower than European Americans. With regard to gender, the researchers found a 4 to 10-point difference in graduation rates, which favored African American women over African American men. Heckman and LaFontaine found that different graduation patterns emerge when calculations are gender specific. There is a significant increase in the dropout rate when comparisons are made between males and females.

Furthermore, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) also reported statistics that show how the graduation rates between European Americans and minority groups are decreasing; however this statistic is inaccurate when considering only male students. Heckman and LaFontaine added that African American male youths are incarcerated at a higher rate than European American male youths. CPS-based status completion rates do not include incarcerated males who obtain their GEDs. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of African Americans who obtain GEDs as opposed to European Americans. Heckman and LaFontaine reported that the graduation ratios between European Americans and African Americans have remained consistent for the past 30 years and have almost consistently shown an estimated 15% difference favoring European Americans. The aggregated data, presented by Heckman and LaFontaine estimated that the graduation rates for European Americans is about 80%, as compared to African Americans, with about 65%. The data showed a consistently higher high school completion rate for European Americans.

The Price of Dropping Out

Dropping out can adversely affect the lives of those who make this decision. In recent decades, it has been estimated that millions of children leave school without obtaining a high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The cost of dropping out leaves a large impact on the individual and the community. Because it has been established that minority groups, particularly more African Americans drop out of school as opposed to European Americans (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Kohli, 2012; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Ogbu, 2003; Royal & Lamport, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), this may ultimately affect pertinent social issues such as educational gaps among races, income distribution, and even health disparities.

Dropping can negatively impact wages and income. The U.S. Census Bureau [DCESA] (2008) reported that one of the most significant impacts of dropping out is decreased lifetime earnings. Because this study focused on African American men, only the trends for male dropouts are reported. The U.S. Census Bureau [DCESA] (2008) reported that in 2006, men who did not earn a high school diploma had a median income of only \$22,151, as opposed to those with a high school diploma who earned \$31,715. This showed that the earnings of men who dropped out of high school receive about 30% less than those with a high school credential. The U.S. Census Bureau [DCESA] explained that this loss would result in an annual wage difference of about \$9,600.

Low wages may be a result of dropping out; however there are some exceptions. Tyler and Loftstrom (2009) noted that in some cases, earning a high school diploma does not cause wage differences. Rouse (2007) explained that it may be wrong to assume that the wages of a high school dropout would be considerably higher, if they were to become a high school completer. However, after an extensive review of research assessing the effect of education on earnings, Rouse concluded, that there is a measurable difference in the income of high school dropouts and high school completers. Additionally, it was found that high school dropouts have higher unemployment rates, are less likely to be employed, and on average, and work fewer weeks per year (Rouse, 2007; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Dropouts were also less likely to receive company pension plans and health insurance coverage (Rouse, 2007).

Dropping out can negatively impact the health of an individual. Dropping out of school is also correlated with poor physical and mental health (Childs Trends Data Bank, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The impact of this link is that poor health conditions lead to lower mortality and increases the need for healthcare.

Dropouts cause an economic strain on society and causes an imbalance in tax revenues. Higher dropout rates cause losses in tax revenues (Rouse, 2007), increased dependence on public programs and health care programs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), as well as higher crime rates (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2009; Christle et al., 2007). Rouse estimated that dropouts pay less in federal and states income taxes as compared to high school graduates (an average amount of \$1,600 and \$3,800, respectively). According to

Rouse over a lifetime there is a 42% loss of income for dropouts resulting in a loss of approximately \$60,000. For approximately 600,000 dropouts of legal age, these estimates suggested that approximately \$36 billion are lost in federal and state income taxes yearly. Furthermore, since it was emphasized in the previous paragraph that multiple circumstances make dropouts less financially comfortable, public assistance programs would need additional funding in order to support them. Tyler and Lofstrom noted that dropouts constitute about 68% of the nation's state prison inmates. A strong correlation was found between dropping out and increasing crime rate according to the study conducted by Tyler and Lofstrom. Dropping out increased the probability that an individual would commit a crime (Anderson, 2014; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Oreopoulos and Salvanes; 2011). Lochner and Moretti (2004) reported that each additional year of schooling decreases murders and assaults by over 30%, vehicle theft by 20%, arson by 13%, and burglaries are decreased by 6%. When they examined trends on robbery and rape, they found no significant effect. Their findings indicated that \$1.4 billion could be saved each year if school districts increased male graduation rates by 1%. Per student, cities could save approximately \$2,100 for each male that obtains a high school credential. These figures make it clear that the reduction of the dropout rate has a large financial impact on society.

Causes of Student Dropouts

Given the significant prevalence of dropouts across the nation, it is important that I examine the reasons why students dropout. In order to efficiently address the dropout

problem, knowledge of the underlying problems encountered by the students that lead them to drop out are examined. A number of elements explained why students drop out of school. The discussion in this section followed Zablocki's (2009) flow in his review of related literature. Zablocki categorized the risk factors for dropping out into three areas: "individual-level factors, institutional-level factors, and student engagement factors" (p. 9). Individual-level factors are characteristics, which include demographics such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Studies, which have examined race as a risk factor for dropping out, was highlighted. Institutional-level factors included the demographic characteristics of the student's families, the community in which the student resides, and the qualities of the school they attended. Some of these variables are school climate, discipline policies, and teacher quality (Lauen, 2009). The third category may be classified as a subtype of the first, but for the purpose of this study, it was used to describe the common factors, which have both an individual and an institutional component. Because the purpose of this study was to identify common experiences and perceptions, which lead to African American males dropping out, studies, which assessed African American males, were highlighted and examined in Section 3. Ogbu's theory was discussed in more detail in order to provide a conceptual framework for this study.

Individual-level Factors

Dropping out is not a problem caused by independent factors. A student's decision to drop out is influenced by a number of complex factors; oftentimes, it is the culmination act of longstanding disengagement from school (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson,

2007; Darensbourg, et al., 2010; De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & Van den Brink, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2011; Kahu, 2013; Lauen, 2009; Sparks, Johnson & Akos, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Several demographic or background factors are often cited as predictors for dropping out (De Witte et al., 2013; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). Among the factors described, studies examining gender and race were the focus of this section.

Male students tend to drop out of school at a higher rate than females. De Witte et al. (2013) study indicated that males have a higher likelihood of dropping out than females. De Witte and Rogge (2013) performed an experiment that focused on individual gender and school tracking of the student, and found that classes with more boys did worse than classes with more girls. This finding suggested that boys may be more impressionable to peer effects as opposed to girls. Cataldi, Laird, and KewalRamani (2009) found that this trend has not changed significantly in school districts over the past thirty years.

In addition to gender, race has been found to be an indicator of who may be at risk of dropping out. Race plays a role in the likelihood that a student may choose to dropout (Darensbourg et al., 2010; De Witte et al., 2013; Kohli, 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Somers et al., 2009). In particular, race has been a significant factor in determining whether a student was referred for disciplinary measures; these accumulations of disciplinary measures further prompt a student to consider dropping out of school (De Witte et al., 2013). Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010) conducted a study that examined the changes

in exclusionary discipline rates and how African American students were disproportionately referred more for disciplinary measures than European American students. They defined exclusionary discipline as behavioral measures, which require the removal of the student from school. They examined district data for the academic years 2000 to 2001 through 2008 to 2009 from 288 public schools in Ohio. It was emphasized that the purpose of choosing Ohio for their study was due to how it reflected educational trends on a national level, and how the proportion of European American and African American students approximate national averages. They grouped the data according to incidences of expulsion, out of school suspension and other disciplinary actions, and subsequently interpreted it using repeated measures multivariate analysis. Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin showed that African American students are subjected to more exclusionary discipline practices than European American students. Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin added that ethnicity accounted for over 25% exclusionary discipline practices. Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin found that the data were consistent with other research that examined the disproportionate rates of expulsions and suspensions of African American students. Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin reported that disciplinary actions were more aggressive for African American students as compared to European American students. Their findings demonstrated that exclusionary practices adversely affected African American students as opposed to European American students.

Disciplinary actions often exclude a student from the classroom and isolate him from interacting with other students. A study by Skiba et al. (2011) examined a similar

topic regarding school disciplinary measures. They studied, on a national scale, the disproportionality of discipline practices among African Americans and Latino students as compared to whites. In this study, the results pertaining only to African Americans were examined. They reviewed 364 discipline referral documents of elementary and middle schools during the year 2005 to 2006. Reported data by selected school personnel was uploaded in the Web-based School-wide Information System, and regression analysis was performed. They found that for elementary and middle school, respectively, African American students were 2.19 and 3.78 times as likely to be referred for behavioral problems as compared to their white classmates (Skiba et al., 2011). Additionally, the study also found that, compared to their European American peers, African American students were more likely to be suspended or expelled as a consequence for the same or similar offense (Skiba et al., 2011). Suspension or expulsion ratios have not yet been estimated using a sample in high school.

Despite these studies, De Witte et al. (2013) argued that there is still a considerable amount of literature which contends that race does not play a significant role when compared to family background and student engagement levels. This study addressed issues that affect a large percentage of the drop out population. I examined what particular common perceptions that African American males have regarding their decision to drop out of school. Since this study focused on a very particular group, new insights emerged which were unique to this group as opposed to other racial groups or females. In addition to gender and race, other factors included high mobility, high school

employment, substance abuse, history of juvenile delinquency, as well as teenage pregnancy, marriage, and parenthood (De Witte et al., 2013; Hirschfield, 2009). Each factor was briefly discussed subsequently.

Some students lose interest in education because they are forced to attend different school districts during the school-year. Mobility referred to the frequency a student transfers from one school or district to the next (Baker, 2011). Students who have attended five or more schools in their lifetime are more at risk for dropping out than those who were consistently in the same institution (Baker, 2011). I proposed that one reason for this behavior is that the students lack a connection to the institution; this lack hinders them from establishing themselves within the community of the school.

Male students who are 16 or older often leave school to work and earn an income to contribute financially to their families. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) stated that males who are older than 16 years of age are more likely to drop out for employment reasons, as compared to younger males who are more likely to leave school for disciplinary reasons. Their findings made a significant impact on this study, as African American males who dropped out of school at the age of 16 or older cited that employment was important in order to assist his family with meeting obligations. This factor was considered when the reason for dropping out were examined.

A study conducted by McCaffrey, Liccardo Pacula, Han and Ellickson (2010), which examined students from the seventh to the tenth grade in South Dakota, found a significant relationship between marijuana intake and dropping out. They found that

students who used marijuana were more likely to drop out even after taking into account the participants' school achievement (McCaffrey et al., 2010). McCaffrey et al. explained that marijuana use had a negative impact on youth and place them at a greater risk for dropping out.

Trouble with the law and criminal activities were also cited as an indicator of dropping out. A history of arrests was cited as a predictor of a student's likelihood to drop out of school. Hirschfield (2009) examined a sample of 4,844 students from the inner-city area of Chicago. His findings showed that students who had committed a crime and were arrested during their early years of high school (ninth or tenth grade) were more likely to drop out than students who were never arrested.

Lastly, teenage pregnancy, marriage and parenthood are closely associated with each other (De Witte et al., 2013) and was discussed in terms of how it affected males. Royal and Lamport (2012) noted that some males who are in a relationship with pregnant females during high school feel responsible for their actions and thus drop out of school in order to seek employment to financially support their child and partner. One of the participants in Royal and Lamport's (2012) study noted how her male partner had dropped out of school to work; as an alternative to graduating, her partner had been GED certified instead.

The last three variables discussed in this section are related in such a way that the variables studied addressed risky behaviors that predispose adolescents to disciplinary measures or incarceration (De Witte et al., 2013). As such, these studies indicated that if

a student is predisposed or is influenced to participate in risky behaviors, they are more likely to drop out than students who are more cautious (De Witte et al., 2013). I used these findings to examine previous risky behaviors in which African American males were involved. Some of the reasons why these men were inclined to risky behaviors was also examined in this study.

Institutional-level Factors

Besides individual factors, the environment played a significant part in shaping the student's decision to drop out. In this section, I discussed the role of familial support in the student's life and the qualities of the school and how these factors directly or indirectly affected the student's decision to stay or leave.

Perhaps one of the most pressing concerns with regards to family was their socioeconomic status (Chen, & DesJardins, 2010). A study by Bradley and Renzulli (2011) used data from the Educational Longitudinal Survey to explain the relationship between socioeconomic factors and dropping out. They found that, given the same income bracket between African Americans and European Americans, the difference in socioeconomic status was a larger risk factor for African American students' decision to drop out as compared to their white counterparts (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). The study completed by Bradley and Renzulli proved that socioeconomic status was a moderator of the relationship between ethnicity and dropping out of high school.

A study by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) identified several school characteristics related to the dropout rate. Christle et al. studied "twenty high schools

with the highest dropout rates (HDOS) in Kentucky and compared a wide variety of school characteristics to the twenty high schools with the lowest dropout rates (LDOS) in the state” (p. 327). In addition, they selected four schools from each group in order to make case examples. They employed various data gathering techniques including administrator surveys, staff interviews, and campus observations. One of the pertinent characteristics they examined was the proportion of white students to minorities. They found that the greater the percentage of minority students, the higher the dropout rate associated with the school. Christle et al. stated that schools that have student bodies that consists primarily of minority students is five times more likely to have weaker promoting standards than schools that have a majority European American student body. They also found, through the case samples, that the school climate for HDOS and LDOS were markedly different: (1) schools among the LDOS were cleaner and more orderly, (2) the teachers were dressed more professionally, (3) there was more adult supervision in the LDOS, and (4) the staff were more authoritative in the LDOS (Christle et al., 2007). European American schools operated at higher standards than the schools that had predominate minority student populations.

The size of the school was examined as another contributing factor to high dropout rates. A study by Werblow and Duesbery (2009) examined the how the size of the high school affected math achievement and the dropout rate by examining data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. They found that students from smaller schools (< 674 students) were less at risk of dropping out than their scholastic

counterparts in large high schools (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). They found that for every additional 674 students in a school, there was a 12% increase in the average student dropout rate and 30% higher dropout rate in rural schools as compared to suburban schools (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Letihwood and Jantzi (2009) noted that for urban schools in districts with secondary schools the size of the student body may exceed 2,500. Additionally, Letihwood and Jantzi noted that smaller schools with student bodies at or below 1,500 may be more ideal in promoting retention as opposed to larger school capacities. These findings indicated that large student populations accounted for higher failure rates.

Student Engagement Factors

Recent evidence identified student engagement factors as a predictor for graduation and conversely, dropping out (De Witte et al., 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom 2009). This could be considered as a subset of individual-level factors, but for this study, it was discussed separately for definitional clarity. Kahu (2013) defined student engagement as the extent to which the environment impacted the individual, or student, to influence his or her educational investment. It can be said that this is a measure of an individual's overall attitude towards the school and the people he interacts with in school (Kahu, 2013). Fredricks et al., (2011) explained that there are three dimensions that affect a students' attitude towards schooling that involve their behavioral attitude, their emotional response and cognitive development during the educational process. Fredricks et al explained that behavioral engagement is related to the level of participations and

engagement of the student in both academic and extracurricular school activities. It was observed through attendance, work completion, class participation, and misbehavior. Emotional engagement was identified as the positive and negative reactions to the students' teachers, classmates, academic lessons, and the school itself. Positive engagement predicted the students' ties to the institution and influenced the extent of his willingness to work. Cognitive engagement referred to the students' level of investment in learning. Studies conducted in North America noted how student engagement was analogous to one's level of motivation and a crucial predictor of an individual's decision to drop out of school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2012; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Students must be actively engaged in the learning process in order to have a positive school experience.

Student disengagement added to the likelihood that a student would drop out. Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore and Friant (2010) found that all students report school disengagement as one of the main reasons for dropping out of school:

Dropouts reported not seeing the connection between classroom learning and their own lives and career dreams. Nearly half cited "boredom" and classes not being interesting as principal reasons for dropping out. They talked about "taking classes in school that you're never going to use in life" or at least not understanding well enough why those classes were valuable. In addition, the majority of dropouts said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, and

many said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them (p. 5-6).

Additional research by Tyler and Lofstrom confirmed that disengagement increased the likelihood that a student would drop out. In their study, they found common responses such as “did not like school” and “classes were not interesting” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009, p. 84). These responses shaped the notion that classes needed a curriculum that was more relevant in order to make students more engaged and interested in their lessons.

Factors such as poor academic achievement, grade retention, a student’s professional aspirations and emotional engagement were noted as strong predictors of dropping out (De Witte et al., 2013). Among these predictors, they found that the strongest predictor was grade retention (De Witte et al., 2013; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Unsatisfactory test scores and class failure, which led to eventual grade retention, were strongly correlated with dropping out of school. As noted, poor student engagement, associated with absenteeism and discipline problems, were strong predictors of dropping out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Grade retention was found to increase the probability of drop out. Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, and Onwuegbuzie (2011) study examined the relationship between ninth grade retention and dropout rates. They studied the transcripts of 1,202 students from a rural high school in Southeast Texas. They found students who were retained in the ninth grade were more likely to drop out and not graduate on time as

compared to students who were retained in the eighth or tenth grade (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). The indication here is that the ninth grade experience is critical and may play an important role in student retention.

To identify other risk factors of dropping out, Sparks, et al. (2010) evaluated the data of 17,735 ninth grade students from North Carolina from the academic years 2003 to 2004 through 2004 to 2005. They conducted a factor analysis in order to determine which variables were the best predictors of dropping out. They identified “the big three” risk factors most associated with dropping out: (1) “retention in any grade”, (2) “obtaining a below-grade score on the North Carolina end-of-grade test or failing Algebra I”, and lastly, (3) “receiving a long-term suspension” (p. 47). All three risk factors are associated significantly with student engagement.

As student engagement had a profound effect on dropping out, information obtained in this study explained the significant turning points as to when African American males experienced the initial emotion that led to disengagement from school. Specifically, I examined the common experiences that they underwent and determined if it agreed or disagreed with the existing literature. I also examined the instances of grade retention, failures of subjects or state exams, and a history of exclusionary discipline measures. Since there were other risk factors present, other underlying factors are discussed.

One study of particular relevance noted how it is a combined interplay of factors that pushes a student to drop out. Royal and Lamport (2012) conducted a

phenomenological qualitative study using eight participants who had dropped out of one particular school in South Georgia. Their study involved two individual interviews and a focus group discussion to identify the perceptions of why students choose to drop out and if they returned to school, the factors that motivated them to re-enroll in their former traditional school, or to transfer to a non-traditional school. Half the participants were African American while the other half were European American. Royal and Lamport highlighted the differences in perceptions of the two racial groups. Several common themes were reported as to why the participants chose to drop out and/or return to school: (1) poor academic performance, (2) personal struggles, (3) importance of family and school relationships, (4) characteristics of their previous secondary school environment, and (5) personal aspirations (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Each theme is briefly discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Upon examination of the participants' school records, all but one participant struggled academically (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Those involved in the study failed anywhere from four to fifteen classes, which were a result of excessive absences or poor performance. Besides absences, four out of eight participants struggled to pass at least one of five required Georgia Secondary school graduation tests, which significantly affected their decision to drop out.

Other factors that were not related to the school environment had a profound effect on the lives of the participants. Most of the participants had personal struggles outside of their academic challenges (Royal & Lamport, 2012). A big factor, especially

for the female participants, was their unplanned pregnancy during secondary school. It was also noted that the male partners of these participants had dropped out of school in order to provide financial support to their child. Another major influence on three of the participants was the use of cocaine and marijuana. Many of the participants also experienced social discomfort and embarrassment, which hindered them from returning to school after a long period of absence.

Relationships with family and teachers was identified as another key factor, which influenced the participants. Family members or guardians could either help or hinder them drastically with the amount of support or turmoil they experienced at home (Royal & Lamport, 2012). The participants also voiced strong opinions with regards to the supportive or disdainful faculty in their decision to drop out of school. For one participant, the encouragement he received from his former teachers was a big factor in his decision to return to his previous school. Personal aspirations of each student were also a large influence on their decision to return and graduate. The participants who returned to school felt that graduating from high school was a huge personal accomplishment that they needed to fulfill in order to get a good job or get into a good college.

The study by Royal and Lamport (2012) showed how a complex number of factors affects a students' decision to drop out. It was clear that each student did not take the decision to drop out lightly. Rather, it was a culmination of disengagement and negative attitudes and feelings, which was compounded by academic factors. Royal and

Lampton may be used as a basis for conducting the research in this study. They recommended that an additional study should be conducted in a setting, such as one where there are no non-traditional schools in the district. Although their study employed a similar technique that was used in this study, this study confined itself to African American male students. This research may add to the findings reported by Royal and Lampton, as it uncovered other underlying causal factors for African American male dropouts.

The Oppositional Culture Theory

There are many reasons why students drop out of school; however the outcome results in the failure to obtain a high school credential. Studies have shown that African American students drop out a higher rate as compared to their white peers (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Ogbu, 2003; Royal & Lampton, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Identifying the conditions that make high school more meaningful and engaging for students, particularly for African Americans is essential in addressing the dropout problem. The dropout phenomenon were provided by the voices of the participants. Qualitative studies consists of variables, constructs, and hypothesis that are used to explain behavior and attitudes (Creswell, 2009). Ogbu's oppositional culture theory was discussed as the foundation for this research study.

Some cultural experiences are unique to African American communities. The oppositional cultural theory was based on a cultural-ecological approach (Mocombe, &

Tomlin, 2010). His intent to explain the unique and changing behavior of African Americans was that this minority group had developed their own identity based on two possible underlying reasons. The first was that African Americans developed an oppositional identity that demarcated certain activities and perceptions, which were not appropriate for them because these activities and perceptions were characteristic of European Americans. The second was that African Americans developed a low-class identity, which stemmed from a longstanding history of poverty. Mocombe and Tomlin described how the second explanation is most commonly used when giving an underlying reason as to why blacks “devalue educational attainment” (p. 1). The choice to uphold African American culture or academic achievement as opposing ideas is the foundation of the oppositional culture theory (Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010).

The oppositional cultural theory therefore described the phenomenon in which the structure and the social psychology of the status of the African American underclass opposed their interest of the group seen in a higher status in the larger culture of the American social structure (Harris, 2006). Inequality played a larger role in their view of racial or cultural indication of their concept of belonging to a specific group (Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010). Mocombe and Tomlin (2010) give an interpretation of this hypothesis in the context of educational achievement:

As black students matriculate through school systems and become adolescents, their lack of effort or concern in school should not be interpreted as a fear of “acting white.” Instead, it should be interpreted as the social psychological

disconnect black adolescent students perceive between education and economic success amongst the black underclass in urban inner cities. Education and high achievement are marginalized because other means not associated with education, such as sports, hip-hop culture, drug dealing and other illegal activities commoditized through hip-hop culture...appear to be more viable means or social roles to economic gain or success, status, and upward mobility for blacks (p. 2).

In essence, the theory is like a specific context for the self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, popular culture and media propagate the stereotype of African Americans in this setting of sports and hip-hop, and this stereotype eventually becomes the individual's reality (Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010). Ogbu (1978) argued that the difference in educational engagement of African Americans and whites occurs because they perceive lower returns on both educational and occupational opportunities than whites. He explained that this stems from decades of African Americans as slaves (Harris, 2006). This history influences African Americans' perceptions of financial success. African Americans "experience or perceive barriers to success with regard to employment opportunities due to racial discrimination and societal inequalities" (Harris, 2006, p. 798). These perceptions lead them to become disenchanted about their potential and doubt the value of an education. Harris (2006) explained that consequently, African Americans develop a culture, which opposes and separates them from the dominant group and thus creates a resistance to European American cultural standards that require an education.

This resistance results in eventual withdrawal or dropping out of school altogether (Harris, 2006).

Ogbu (2003) suggested that the academic efforts of African American children decrease as they proceed from elementary to high school. Particularly, Ogbu stated “that the lack of effort became more serious as students got older and began to think that they too, would have difficulty in the opportunity structure...just because they were black.” (p. 154). Additionally, he suggested that African Americans felt ambivalent and skeptical about the American ideals of success and education through hard work.

The conceptual framework was an appropriate theory for this study because it emphasized how African American students in high school are highly at risk for not completing an education. This theory was also culture specific to African Americans, which was the focus of the study.

Recommended Interventions to Address Dropouts

Given the prevalence and impact of dropouts on society, it was imperative that I examine the recommended interventions and their effectiveness in reducing the dropout rate. Federal legislation is the key to improving school discipline policies and equality in school districts. Given the body of evidence on disproportionate student treatment, legislation must be created that ensures that students are treated fairly and ethically regardless of racial or gender differences. With regards to legislative policies, Losen (2011) outlined three recommendations: (1) “strengthen support and training for teachers to improve classroom and behavior management”, (2) “improve annual collection and

public reporting of discipline data” and (3) “align discipline policy with academic achievement goals by helping schools reduce high suspension rates” (p. 1). He emphasized how “legislators should strengthen and enforce the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)’s requirement that low-SES and minority students are not more likely than their higher-SES and European American peers to be taught by inexperienced, unqualified or “out-of-field” teachers” (p. 16). Implementing the ESEA would ensure that all students would have equal opportunities to be taught by qualified teachers. With regards to annual reports, data should be included that addresses all types of disciplinary procedures, the demographics of the students involved, and the frequency of suspensions. Losen (2011) also recommended that, on a national level, all schools whose suspension rates exceeds the states average, should be required to change their behavioral policies and provide the necessary support to implement effective changes.

Wilson et al. (2011) further discussed current prevention and intervention programs across the nation. Wilson et al found that there have been very few “systematic reviews on the effects of prevention and intervention programs on school dropout and completion outcomes” (p. 14). In their study, they “classified these interventions into three types: school-based, school-affiliated, or community-based” Wilson et al, (2011, p. 17). They defined school-based programs as interventions that are administered by school officials and occur during normal school operation. School-affiliated programs are those that are conducted in conjunction with other agents such as community service providers. Such programs usually occur before or after school hours and outside the

school vicinity. Community-based programs are those, which are administered by third parties not affiliated with schools. They found that this type of program was the least popular, comprising only 15% of the 130 samples in their study.

The researchers found that the average program duration of these programs were around 77 weeks, with more than half their samples involving daily sessions (Wilson et al., 2011). This indicated that these programs were relatively long-term in nature. Three-fourths of the current intervention programs involved high school students perhaps due to their observation that this educational period was where most dropouts had occurred. Additionally, around 65% of the samples were non-whites (Wilson et al., 2011). The researchers also found that around 90% were from low socioeconomic status families.

In addition to studying the demographics of dropout intervention programs, Wilson et al. (2011) found that students who were enrolled in such programs were 1.63 times more likely to complete school as opposed to students who did not participate in any program. The characteristics associated with more effective interventions include good implementation quality, shorter duration, and programs conducted by the communities. Wilson et al stated that “attendance monitoring and incentives, child care, community service, and school restructuring programs produced best results.” (p. 5).

Schargel and Smink (2014) further identified fifteen strategies, which were found to be effective measures in addressing the dropout problem. The strategies that are discussed briefly are early intervention, key intervention strategies, instructional improvement, and community involvement.

The first three emphasized strategies show how early intervention can play a role in reducing the likelihood of dropping out: family involvement initiative in school dropout programs, early childhood educational programs, and enrolment in a strong reading and writing program. (Schargel & Smink, 2014). The researchers believed that addressing the dropout problem involved interventions that were not just within the four walls of the school, but rather, they employed a holistic approach to address the underlying causes.

The researchers also outlined four key strategies to address low student engagement: mentoring or tutoring, service learning, alternative schooling education, and out-of-school enhancement (Schargel & Smink, 2014). They defined mentoring as a one-to-one activity that focused on academic improvement. Through individualized help, a positive relationship between mentor and mentee can help address specific subject competencies. Service learning is a form of community exposure, which aims to improve personal growth, social development, career achievement, and promote civic responsibility. Alternative schooling encompasses educational programs, which employ non-traditional and individualized instructional methods. Most of these schooling programs follow a different schedule and frequency from that of traditional schools. Lastly, out-of-school enhancement involves enrichment or extra-curricular programs, which aim to heighten interest in different academic and non-academic fields.

Teacher training and better teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles was identified as an additional intervention strategy. Among the strategies noted

for this are to increase opportunities for teacher professional development and provide additional training on how to effectively educate students with different learning styles and intelligences (Schargel & Smink, 2014). The researchers emphasized that professional development must be centered on the teachers' ability to be able to engage and support students through various training opportunities. Educators should emphasize different ways of learning in order for hone students' creativity in finding ways to solve problems.

Lastly, the community must also be involved in the process of forming the student. Each student is part of a larger system that cannot be separated or work in isolation from the school system. As such, schools must make an effort to link with communities in order to deliver a holistic student formation. The strategies outlined are systemic renewal of school policies and structure, community outreach programs, career education, vocational programs, and improve conflict and violence resolution skills (Schargel & Smink, 2014). This may particularly work well in the local setting as it was the strategy employed by Rodriguez and Conchas (2009). They conducted interviews with African American and Latino dropouts who were part of a community-based truancy prevention program to assess its effectiveness and found that a strong relationship between the school and the community were essential in decreasing truancy and the dropout rate.

Bloom (2010) discussed interventions to assist dropouts to remain functional in society. Bloom focused on assistance for individuals who had no plans to return to

school. He termed these interventions as “second chance” programs, which provided alternative forms of education, training, employment, counseling and social service assistance. Bloom stressed that, rather than have dropouts engage in criminal behavior, companies can strive to provide young people with work opportunities despite their lack of an education. At-risk individuals should be offered other viable opportunities to succeed when they fail to meet the requirements of the traditional education system.

Methodological Review

Phenomenological studies are conducted to identify common experiences that occur between individuals in certain groups or settings. Creswell (2009) defined “a phenomenological study as one that describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived-experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 13). Turner (2010) suggested that phenomenology is gaining a deep understanding of the very nature of a thing. The researcher in “a phenomenological study collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals studied” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Phenomenology defines the description as what an individual experienced and how he or she experienced it (Turner, 2010). According to Christensen and Brumfield (2010), phenomenology has strong philosophical underpinnings, drawing heavily on the writings of the late Edmund Husserl and those who expanded on his work, specifically Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Husserl believed that all judgments about what is real should be suspended until they are confirmed. Christensen and Brumfield defined this suspension as “epoch...a process

involved in blocking biases and assumptions in order to explain a phenomenon in terms of its own inherent system of meaning” (p. 137). Bracketing was identified by Christensen and Brumfield as, “the process of epoch,” where researchers suppress their own biases in an effort to objectively examine a phenomenon from the perspective of the participant.

In addition to understanding the experience of participants, researchers search for commonality of experiences, as with the goal of this study. The commonality of experience is known as the essence of the phenomenon (Turner, 2010). I entered the participant’s life experience at a deep level in order to truly understand that lived-experience from the participant’s point of view. I identified the commonality of experiences among African American males who dropped out of high school.

In qualitative studies, research questions are open-ended and evolving. These questions are broad in nature, addressing the essence of the phenomenon under study. I used research questions that were open-ended and evolving. These questions were broad in nature, addressing the essence of the school experiences of the research participants.

Barry and Reschly (2012) utilized a longitudinal method to conduct their study on dropouts. In a longitudinal study, participants are examined over a specific period of time. The purpose of the study by Barry and Reschly was to uncover engagement predictors that may lead to dropping out. Barry and Reschly found in their longitudinal study that several predictors affected school completion. They noted that academic engagement, school level interventions, and student level interventions were important

factors that were needed in conjunction in order to decrease the school completion rate of African American students.

An experimental design is used to determine what common characteristics exist among a group. Creswell (2009), described a true experiment as an experimental design where individuals are assigned randomly to research study groups. Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Lipsey, Steinka-Fry, and Morrison (2011), used an experimental design with ten subjects in each of the intervention and control groups and their analysis found that dropout and intervention programs were effective in preventing children from dropping out. In their experiment, Wilson et al, concluded that intervention and prevention programs would be effective if they were implemented properly and appropriate for dropouts within the local communities.

An ethnographic analysis of the dropout rate was examined by McNeil, Coppola, and Radigan. Mcneil, Coppola, and Radigan (2008) found in their ethnographic analysis that African American children obtained lower scores on achievement tests and are therefore “pushed out” of their school because they are unable to show “measurable improvement.” Creswell (2008) added that researchers who conduct ethnographic studies observe participants in their natural cultural settings over a prolonged period of time. Although many different methods have been used in an effort to understand the dropout problem among African-American students, the outcomes show that prevention is possible and can be effective in improving the graduation rate among this venerable group. Qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied to discover methods to

control the dropout rate. In this study, a qualitative approach was used. A more in-depth discussion of the methodology is presented in Section 3.

Summary

Dropouts have existed since the institution of high school but were not a prominent issue until the 1960s (Royal & Lamport, 2012). The National Education Association (NEA) and the U.S. Department of Education defined a dropout as a student who, with the exception of death, leaves school before graduation and does not transfer to another school (Zablocki, 2009). Currently, the dropout rates are derived from two different sources: the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Common Core of Data (CCD). The former is more popularly used for long-term trends on a national level while the latter appears to be more accurate in describing local dropout rates. While most data sources and trends have been inaccurate in describing the dropout rates over the last three decades, the gap between African Americans and European Americans appears to be significant, with African Americans at a greater disadvantage. Many studies done in the last decade have confirmed that African Americans, particularly males, are more likely to drop out of school than European Americans students (Darensbourg, et al. 2010; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Kohli, 2012; Lee, et al., 2011; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Ogbu, 2003; Royal & Lamport, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The reasons for this are complex and numerous, and may be classified according to individual-level, institutional-level or student engagement factors. Regardless of the reasons, at-risk students undergo a long process of disengagement, which culminate in

the act of leaving school. One of the theories behind African Americans' disengagement from school is presented in Ogbu (2003) oppositional culture theory, which describes how African Americans marginalize education and high achievement due to their lack of psychological connection between education and financial success in life. The theory proposed that this belief system may have come from decades of cultural oppression.

Students, teachers, administrators, and legislators must know more about the underlying causes behind the significant number of dropouts. Identifying the conditions that make high school more meaningful and engaging for students, particularly for African American males is essential in addressing the dropout problem. As such, I aim to contribute to the existing literature by identifying the common reasons and perceptions about the school experience that lead African American males to choose to drop out of school. Appropriate interventions may arise from the findings of this study. The factors mentioned in this section identify some of the problems that may contribute to the dropout rate among African American males. Student level factors, school-level factors, and engagement factors are mentioned and offered as possible reasons for the dropout rate among this group. The literature indicated that several factors impact the dropout rate among African American male students. Changes in educational institutions and society, in general, is experienced differently by each individual person, however the experience for African American males is necessary to document in order to decrease the dropout rate among this group and develop programs to meet their needs. In Section 3, I

discuss the methodology used to investigate the African American male dropout problem in northern Florida.

Section 3: Research Method

Phenomenology is a method used by qualitative researchers to obtain information about the experiences and perceptions of people. Merriam (2002) described a phenomenological study as one that focuses on personal experiences and the essence of some observed phenomenon. Information is gathered to understand the personal feelings, attitudes, experiences, and beliefs of a phenomenon. Creswell (2009) reported that “phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), living, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of life. This type of research deals with information from the recollection of the individual usually by way of written data, recorded information, or oral recordings. The experiences of each individual are often recalled or told differently from one research subject to another. In many cases, the researcher has to rely on the person’s ability to recall an experience and tell the story with honesty and truthfulness. In this study, I focused on the educational experiences and perceptions of 10 African American male students who dropped out of school in North Florida before obtaining a high school credential. I used a qualitative inductive analysis design to record information on the experiences and perceptions that each participant experienced in the high school environment that led them to make the decision to drop out. Their stories provided information about the school environment, the teachers, and their peers that contributed to their decision.

Qualitative Research Tradition

The research tradition for this study was phenomenological. Creswell (2009) reported that phenomenology is a philosophy that involves understanding the lived experiences of research participants. The participants provided information about their experiences, and this information was compiled in order to find some of the common experiences and perceptions that may exist among African American male dropouts in North Florida. Because qualitative research is an interpretive investigation, the phenomenological research method was an appropriate approach to use for this investigation. Merriam (2002) reported that qualitative research involves collecting data from first person accounts or stories based on the experiences of research participants. Data collection was based on audio-recorded face-to-face or audio-recorded telephone interview recounts of the school experiences of each participant that played a role in their decision to drop out.

Other research strategies such as grounded theory or quantitative analysis were inappropriate for this study due to the nature of each. In a grounded theory study, the researcher would apply several stages of data collection in order to obtain information and attempt to make a comparison of two ideas. According to Creswell (2009), the grounded theory approach requires that the researcher derive a theory from views of the participants. A qualitative analysis requires the researcher to observe some measureable data or a specific variable. Creswell noted that “in qualitative research, variables are related to answer a research question (e.g., “How does self-esteem influence the

formation of friendships among adolescents?”) or to make predictions about what the researcher expects the results to show” (p. 51). Noting the nature of quantitative analysis or the grounded design, would not yield the personal data and information that was needed in order to identify the individual experiences and perceptions that led to the student choosing to drop out.

Research Questions

The intent of this phenomenological research study was to explore the high dropout rate among African American male students in northern Florida. The intention of this study was to answer the following questions based on the following rationales:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). What social, cultural, educational, and economic elements contribute to African American male students dropping out of school? The rationale of RQ1 included understanding the social aspects, the cultural, educational, and economic experiences of the African American male students in northern Florida and the effect that each has on their beliefs and perceptions in an educational setting. In northern Florida, among all students eligible to graduate during the 2012-2013 school year, 41.1% of African American males failed to meet graduation requirements as compared to 23.3% of European American males (FDOE, 2013). Answers to this question could aid in the development of solutions that should meet the needs of this vulnerable group.

Research Question 2 (RQ2). What role did the relationships among African American males and school officials have in influencing them to drop out of school? The rationale of RQ2 included the following: responses to this question may provide answers as to effect that

the relationship between the African American male student and his teachers and administrators have on the student and his decision to drop out. The purpose of this question was to explore how the student felt interacting with these school officials and to determine if their interactions caused the student to develop a negative perception about attending school. One of the main goals of the school system is to provide students with a safe and secure environment that would foster learning. Research Question 3 (RQ3). What common perceptions about the school experience can be identified among African American male students who dropout? The rationale for RQ3 included the following: Responses to this question may provide an analysis of the common threads that exist among African American males who drop out of school in northern Florida schools. The information obtained may be used to determine some of the long-term effects of dropping out. This information provided insight into the experiences within the educational system that pertained specifically to African American males.

Context of the Study

At the time of this study, there were 21 high schools in the northern Florida district located in a large metropolitan city with a total student enrollment of approximately 127,000 (Florida Department of Education, 2014). During the 2013-2014 school year, the African American male student enrollment was 8,376 a decrease from the previous school year of 8,638 (FDOE, 2014). The northern Florida school district lost over 260 African American male enrollees (FDOE, 2014). Also significant for the 2013-2014 school years was that there was a trending decrease in enrollments for African

American males from ninth to 12th grade. The FDOE (2014) reported that the African American male student enrollment in north Florida for ninth grade was 2,382; however, each grade level showed declines with 10th grade reporting 2,182, 11th grade 1,890, and 12th grade 1,622, respectively. The overall dropout rate for students in northern Florida schools was approximately 2.9% (FDOE, 2014). The student population was 44% African American, 39% European American, 9% Hispanic American, 4% multiracial, and 4% Asian American (FDOE, 2014)). Each year the decline in African American male student enrollment decreased and continued to follow this trend indicating that this group leaves the school or district.

The mission of the school districts in northern Florida is every school, every classroom, every student, every day. (Duval County Public Schools, 2014) According to the FDOE (2013), the mission is to

Increase the proficiency of all students within one seamless, efficient system, by providing them with the opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills through learning opportunities and research valued by students, parents, and communities, and to maintain an accountability system that measures student progress toward the following goals: Highest student achievement, Seamless articulation and maximum access, Skilled workforce and economic development, Quality efficient services. (p. 1)

These goals of the FDOE are not being met when the matriculation of African American male students is measured from the high school graduation data.

Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants

This study was developed under the guidelines of the ethics outlined by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (Approval no. 03-26-15-0136773) and the National Institution of Health. Analysis of participant responses were obtained objectively, and their responses were recorded, coded, and interpreted. Audio-recorded data were used as well as hand-written notes. Every effort was made to protect the rights of the participants using ethical standards following the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). According to the APA (2010), professional conduct for psychologists is outlined in the Ethics Code that can be applied to other businesses and educational institutions. Following the guidelines outlined by the APA ensured that welfare and rights of each participant were protected during the duration of the data gathering process.

Each face-to-face interview was conducted in a private room in order to protect the identity of each participant. Every effort was made to ensure the comfort of the research participants. Telephone interviews were conducted and recorded at a time that was convenient for the participant. According to Creswell (2009), the interview should be conducted in a natural setting where the researcher can have face-to-face interaction with the participant. Appropriate waivers and informed consent forms were obtained from each participant as well as permission from the public library to use the private study room for interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of each participant and the actual name of the dropout program was assured by using a pseudonym. All documents

will be protected by being stored in a locked file cabinet. All participants selected from the list of referrals compiled by the students attending Seagrove Academy (pseudonym) dropout program were informed of the time and place of each interview session and the intended purpose of the study. The following standards that are outlined by the IRB were followed, but not limited to, were (a) assessment of the research to determine if it was ethically acceptable, (b) elimination of participant risks, (c) written consent obtained from each participant, (d) participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time, and (e) the participants were not exposed to physical or mental harm. After a period of 5 years, all information and data collected during this study will be destroyed by shredding.

This study was conducted using ethical practices, and each participant was treated with respect and dignity. At no time during this research process were participants exposed to personal risks emotionally or physically. All IRB standards were observed during the entire data collection process. During the data collection process, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable or were unwilling to continue. Any issues with discomfort were addressed, and the participants were informed that they could be dismissed from the study without prejudice. At no time were participants forced to participate in this study or provide information.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this study, I was responsible for data collection, coding, and analysis. As the researcher, I guided the interviews by asking the research questions and recording the data as they were presented to me by the participant. Each participant was

informed by phone, mail, or e-mail of similar research questions prior to the actual recording session in order to become familiar with the type of questions that I intended to ask them. Prior to the actual interview, I asked each participant to verify his attendance and willingness to continue in the research process. Welcome letters were sent by e-mail at the beginning of the research once each participant accepted, and thank you letters were e-mailed at the conclusion of the study to each participant. The entire process was reviewed and explained, and the participants were aware of how the questioning would be conducted prior to the interview.

As the researcher, I was careful to remain unbiased and neutral. In order to promote the validity and reliability of this study, a peer review of the data was completed to check for discrepancies. I was interested in the pure interpretation of the stories that were told and provided a true representation of the interview subject. Each participant was encouraged to speak his mind and to give his personal account of his experiences. The participants were given two opportunities to review and revise their responses to ensure the accuracy of his story.

If any researcher biases were noted during the duration of this study, they were recorded and noted; however, every effort was made to avoid biases. I noted that some biases existed during this study, but as the researcher, I suppressed any that could affect the outcome of this research. My personal biases as an alternative school educator and empathy for the African American male were self-monitored in order to preserve the

validity of the data. The objective was to ensure that the participants' stories were accurate and recorded so that their voices were heard and understood.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

The participants for this study were identified from a list of referrals provided by the students at Seagrove Academy which is a dropout recovery program. Seagrove Academy is a program that was established to assist dropouts in returning to school to obtain a high school credential. I attended several meetings at Seagrove Academy in order to obtain volunteers for my study. Each participant was 18 years or older and left school after entering the ninth grade. My goal for this study was to obtain at least 10 volunteers. The participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) African American male 18 years of age or older, (b) dropped out of high school after entering the ninth grade, (c) able to participate in the interviewing process (three 30- to 60-minute interviews), (d) attended school in northern Florida, or (e) direct referrals or potential enrollees in the Seagrove Academy dropout program. Only volunteers who met all of the above criteria were considered for this study.

Data Collection

The design for this study was qualitative phenomenological. This approach was used to explore the perceptions, experiences, and beliefs of each participant through an interview process. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were the primary methods of data collection. Merriam (2002) found that purposeful interview questions add to qualitative research by creating an open dialog between the researcher and the

participant, and guided interview questions allow the participants to provide a descriptive analysis of their experiences. The data were collected during 30- to 60-minute interviews. The data were recorded exactly as the participant spoke and contained grammatical errors or slang. During the second interview, the participants were asked to review their first interview responses and to make changes or corrections to the recorded information. A third interview was conducted in order for the participants to ensure that the information was transcribed correctly and was a true representation of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The focus of the interviews was to gather as much information as possible about the school experiences that led the participant to make the decision to drop out.

Data Analysis

An inductive data analysis approach was used in order to find similarities or patterns that may exist among participants. In this study, I was interested in finding similar components that existed among African American male noncompleters. The data were processed using an open coding procedure. Coding involves organizing material into segments that make the information meaningful (Creswell, 2009). This procedure involved taking data that were collected and placing the information “into categories and then labeling those categories with a term, often a term based on the actual language of the participant (called an *in vivo* term)” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). The data were organized by topics and sorted into specific categories by grouping. The information

obtained was placed in common categories and assigned codes to determine the relevancy to the research study.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Honesty and trustworthiness were the foundation of this qualitative study and were used to determine whether the information was accurate and if it fully represented the participants' thoughts. To determine the accuracy of findings in qualitative research, the research must use different methods such as member checking or peer examination (Creswell (2009). Member checking should also add validity to this research study because it involves determining if the stories relayed by the participants are accurate and recorded as intended, while peer debriefing involves having another independent party (debriefing) review the questions and responses given in the interview. Member checking ensured the validity of the study because the participants were able to correct any researcher misinterpretations. Merriam (2002) stated that using member checks as a strategy to ensure validity allows the participants to comment on the researchers' interpretation of the data and to search for inconsistencies. Creswell (2009) stated, "that member checking can be used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 191). Peer review was used to ensure the validity. My colleague, who is an experienced educator of at-risk students, reviewed the data and assessed whether or not the findings were valid. Using the above measure of validity ensured that the information reported was true and reliable.

Summary

Section 3 provided a detailed account of the design of this study. I used a qualitative phenomenological research strategy. Ten African American male students who dropped out of school after entering the ninth grade were selected for this study. As the researcher, I used my best, unbiased judgment in obtaining information and presented the stories of each participant as they viewed their experiences. The data were collected and corrected during three consecutive interviews in order to ensure that responses were accurately presented. Member checking and debriefing were used to further verify validity. In Section 4, an analysis of the data collected and the findings are presented.

Section 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences that African American males encountered in schools in northern Florida and to determine if there were any common experiences and perceptions that led them to drop out. Merleau-Ponty (1956) found that phenomenological researchers must eliminate their personal experiences and knowledge in order to understand a phenomenon from the perspectives of their research subjects. Additionally, Brevan (2014) asserted that “in phenomenological research initial reflection is by the person who has undergone a particular experience, and this reflection is a primary interpretation” (p. 137). The results of the data collected from 10 African American males who dropped out of school in northern Florida after entering the ninth grade is presented in this section. Details of the school experiences of each African American male student were revealed from their perspectives. The results of the systems of recording and coding data, the findings, discrepant cases, patterns, relationships and themes, evidence of quality, and the conclusion are presented in detail in this section.

Data Gathering

After the approval was issued by the Walden University IRB, a purposive sample of 10 African American males was selected to participate in this phenomenological research study. Phenomenologist conduct research to understand both social and psychological events from the perspective of the research participant involved in the study (Welman and Kruger, 1999). The list of participants was obtained from referrals

from students who were attending the Seagrove Academy dropout program. All of the participant referrals were African American male dropouts and who were students of the Seagrove Academy dropout program; they were interested in telling their stories about their dropout experience. After the list of interested participants was obtained and they expressed an interest to be a part of my research study, a letter of invitation was e-mailed to each interested party inviting him to participate in the research study. Two of the 15 respondents who initially agreed to be a part of the study declined after the letter of invitation was made. In order to reflect a sample dropout population, 10 males were selected from the 13 respondents. Each participant was given a copy of the consent form to sign by e-mail or in person. Eight of the initial interviews were conducted by telephone, and two were conducted by face-to-face interviews. All interviews were audio recorded, and handwritten notes were taken during the interview process. A total of 30 interviews were conducted to gather information for this research study. During the first interview, background information was gathered to gain an understanding of the participants' lives and to understand the effect that dropping out had on their lives. Eight predetermined questions (Appendix A) were used as a tool to guide the interviews. Twenty follow-up interviews were conducted in order to obtain clarification and to gain a deeper understanding of the stories that the participants intended to tell. The interview process took a period of 2 1/2 weeks because of the participants' work schedules. The participants' audio-recorded files were assigned a file number, and each participant's transcription was assigned a letter of the alphabet as an identifier to ensure the anonymity

of each research participant. An independent transcriptionist transcribed the data from the audio recordings. A journal was used to create a chart in order to categorize the responses based on the research questions (Appendix B). The transcribed data were coded using a highlighting technique to determine if any common themes emerged. For example, if the word “trouble” was used it was highlighted in dark pink. Other key phrases such as “teachers didn’t care” were highlighted in yellow, and similar phrases were grouped according to the emerging themes. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), “the first stage in data analysis is recognition, in this stage the researcher identifies the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers” (p. 207). Common themes and saturation of the data were achieved from the 10 participants, and many of the same experiences and perceptions were recorded which showed consistency in the data. The debriefer was an educator who majored in English and taught Advanced Placement English Language Arts. The debriefer reviewed the coded data in order to eliminate researcher bias and to ensure that the tone resembled the accounts given by each participant. The participants were e-mailed a copy of the transcribed data from their initial interview and their follow-up interview to review in order to ensure the accuracy of their accounts and to make sure that the transcription accurately represented their words and their intentions. In order to obtain some background information on each member of the research study, participant profiles were recorded. Table 1 shows the number of participants, their age at the time of the interview, and the last grade that they were enrolled in before they dropped out.

Table 1

Participants, their Ages, and Grade Level at Time of Dropout

Participant	Age	Grade Level at Time of Dropout
Participant "A"	32	9 th Grade
Participant "B"	28	10 th Grade
Participant "C"	26	11 th Grade
Participant "D"	25	12 th Grade
Participant "E"	18	9 th Grade
Participant "F"	34	9 th Grade
Participant "G"	26	12 th Grade
Participant "H"	23	9 th Grade
Participant "I"	20	12 th Grade
Participant "J"	30	9 th Grade

Participant Profiles

Ten African American males who attended northern Florida schools and who dropped out of high school after entering the ninth grade participated in this study. Because African American males make up the largest number of dropouts in northern Florida, the rationale for studying this group was to examine their experiences and perceptions that led them to make the decision to drop out.

Participant A was a 32-year-old male who indicated that he was the father of one son. Participant A lived with his mother and brother. He saw his son every other

weekend and was an active participant in his life. Participant A dropped out of high school after entering the ninth grade because he was given several discipline referrals, and he was inattentive in class. Participant A stated that he did not return to school after being on a long suspension, and he was influenced by his peers and several family members not to go back to school. Participant A stated that he avoided engaging in activities that would lead to trouble with the law, and he indicated that he had never been to jail and that he did not have a police record. Participant A was able to get what he considered a “good paying” job. He was interested in a better paying job, but he was afraid to leave his current employment because he lacked a high school diploma. He believed that job opportunities such as the one that he had may not come to him again because he did not have a high school credential.

Participant B was a 28-year-old male who dropped out of high school after entering the 10th grade. Participant B was the father of two boys and lived with the mother of his children. Together, they made a home for the two boys. Participant B was reared by his grandmother, but she had limited skills and was unable to help him with his school work. Participant B indicated that one of the reasons that he dropped out of school was his inability to get the attention that he needed in class. Participant B added that skipping school with his friends caused him to fall behind on his school work. He admitted that following his peers and hanging in the streets were also contributing factors to his decision to drop out. Participant B did not have a police record and had never been to jail.

Participant C was a 26-year-old male who indicated that his inappropriate behaviors in regular school resulted in his assignment to several alternative school programs. He indicated that he was sent to the alternative school because he had accumulated too many discipline referrals at his regular school. He was unable to overcome peer pressure and was unsuccessful in school due to behavior problems. He admitted that he showed up at the alternative school to socialize with the girls and got distracted and fell behind in his academics. He also admitted that he did not like some of the strict rules at the alternative school, and his friends influenced him to drop out. Participant C indicated that he did spend some time in jail for theft, but had since learned his lesson and had turned his life around. He worked but did not make enough money to live on his own, so he lived with his mother. He had one daughter who lived with her mother. Participant C spent time with his daughter on a regular basis, and he was trying to be a positive influence in her life.

Participant D was a 25-year-old male and a long-time friend of Participant C. He did not like how the administrators talked to the students at his school, and he admitted that he had trouble with authority. The attitude that he developed against the administrators caused him to receive several discipline referrals. Participant D indicated that he managed to avoid being sent to the alternative school, but admitted that it could have been his fate because of his poor behavior. He liked some of his teachers, but he admitted that they were not attentive to his academic needs. Participant D dropped out of school after entering the 12th grade because he wanted more attention from the teachers.

He believed that he did not get the proper assistance in high school for him to remain in school. Some of his friends influenced him to drop out; however, some of his friends stayed the course and completed high school and went on to college.

Participant E was an 18-year-old male who dropped out of school after entering the ninth grade. Participant E was assigned to an alternative school because of behavior problems at his regular school. Participant E went to an alternative school the first week of ninth grade and decided that he was not going to return. Participant E admitted that he had problems with authority and that he did not get along with male teachers. He indicated that female figures surrounded his home life and that he attributed his problems with male authority figures to his rearing. He came from a family of graduates, and he was the only member of his family to drop out. He had good female role models in his family. He admitted that he did not accept discipline well from authorities. Some of his friends went to school and got along well with their teachers. Participant E had a police record and spent 2 years in jail. He admitted that he received little help from his teachers, and he believed that they did not care about him. He dropped out of school because he did not want to follow the rules at the alternative school.

Participant F was 34-years-old, and during his interview, he reported that he enjoyed going to school. He believed that he was unsuccessful in school because he was a slow learner. He believed that he would have done better if he would have been placed in a slower-paced class. High school was a scary experience for him, and he felt that there were too many decisions to make and navigating high school was much different

than middle school. High school was confusing for him, and the teachers did not give him the attention that he needed. Participant F indicated that he did not want his bad behavior to hinder the progress of other students so he thought that dropping out would be best for him. Participant F believed that attending school prevented him from making money. He believed that his decision to drop out was his fault because his family and friends wanted him to stay in school. He admitted that he got into trouble and spent 10 years in prison for drug-related charges. He revealed that the time that he spent in prison gave him a chance to reflect on his life, and when he got out of prison, he was able to turn his life around. While he was in prison, he tried to get his GED, but he explained that the math was too complicated for him to understand so he decided not to complete the courses. He had not had any brushes with the law since his 10-year prison sentence.

Participant G was a 26-year-old male, and he stated that he had served 2 years in prison. He was incarcerated on a drug possession charge. He had twin girls who were only 6-months-old, and due to some issues with the mother of the children, he was given full custody of the girls. Participant G dropped out of high school after entering the 12th grade. He did not have many discipline issues while he was in school, but came from a broken home where he had to do odd jobs in order to obtain money for daily necessities for his mother and other siblings. He dropped out of high school so that he could help his family. Participant G stated that he could have finished school, but dropped out of school at the age of 18 because his family needed him. Although he believed that the teachers

could have done a better job of encouraging him to stay in school, he held himself responsible for the decision.

Participant H was a 23-year-old male. He dropped out of school after entering the ninth grade. He did not have any children. He lived at home with his mother. He was reared in a tough neighborhood where police activity was a common occurrence. He indicated that he was influenced by his peers to drop out of school and said that he made money doing odd jobs and attending school hindered his ability to make money. He had a hard time comprehending the work in school, and he believed that the teachers did not care whether he learned the lessons that were being taught. Participant H spent some time in jail and admitted that problems in his home life and social environment affected his ability to remain in school.

Participant I was a 20-year-old male who stated that he enjoyed some of the subjects that were being taught in school, but made the decision to drop out after entering the 12th grade. He had an opportunity to finish school, but he decided to drop out of school at the age of 17 in order to help his mother after his father passed away. The void that was left in the household after his father died forced him to grow up a lot quicker than he wanted to, and he had to quit school to help his family. At the age of 19, Participant I spent a few months in jail for theft, but he indicated that he would not have gone to jail if he had not been following along with his friends. He admitted that his friends played a role in his decision to drop out because most of them had also dropped out. He had a decent job, and he had plans to get his GED.

Participant J was a 30-year-old male who dropped out of school after entering the ninth grade because his high school experience was not pleasant. Participant J stated that the other children would pick on him and make him feel bad because of how he looked. Participant J indicated that he came from a poor family and that he could not afford the best clothing to wear to school. He decided to drop out of school because he felt that he did not fit into the school environment, and the teachers and administrators overlooked him and his needs. He did not feel comfortable in the school environment, although he had good grades and was not a discipline problem. He decided that dropping out would keep him away from the other students who were picking on him. Participant J had never been to jail, and he indicated that he would like to return to school, and he is currently considering an online GED program.

The information collected from the participant profiles enhanced the data collected from the interview questions and provided an understanding of the effect that dropping out had on the personal lives of the participants. The profile information also provided insight to the reasons why the participants chose to drop out. Qualitative research is developed from statements given by research participants that are based on their past experiences. Creswell (2009). The background data were essential to this research study because they added validity to the research data.

Systems for Tracking Data

The interview questions were designed to determine if there were common perceptions and experiences among African American males who dropped out of school

in northern Florida after entering the ninth grade. The data obtained reflected the school experiences and perceptions from the perspectives of the participants. A journal was used to take notes and to keep track of each participant's audio-recorded files. In the journal, there was a section for each participant that identified him by his assigned letter of the alphabet. Additional information such as the participants' living status and current employment were asked to obtain an idea of how dropping out of school affected their lives. After the recorded interviews had been transcribed and read, handwritten notes were integrated with the transcribed data, and emerging themes were color-coded and highlighted. The data were analyzed by identifying emerging themes from the participant responses. Brevan (2014) suggested that "it is through thematized verbalizations of this reflected experience that we gain access to the thing experienced, its modes of appearing in natural attitude, and its meaning" (p. 137). The coded responses were aligned to the research questions, and emerging themes were categorized by the descriptive phenomenon. Table 2 was created to group common elements together according to the themes related to the research questions. Table 2 shows the common themes that emerged from the voices of the participants.

Table 2

Common Emerging Themes Related to Research Questions

Research Questions	Participants' Perceptions/Experiences
What social, cultural, educational, and economic elements contribute to African American male students dropping out of school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation from family • Peer relationships • Behavioral issues • Cultural misunderstanding • Lack of applicable curricula • Poor socioeconomic status
What role did the relationships among African American male and school officials have in influencing them to drop out of school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation/officials • Poor relationships/teachers • Lack of effective discipline
What common perceptions can be identified among African American male students who drop out?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of role models • Poor job prospects • Shame and guilt

Findings

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to gain an understanding of the experiences that African American male students encountered that led them to make the decision to drop out of school. The phenomenological approach was used to obtain first-hand information from the stories told by the research participants. Interviews were conducted in order to hear from the participants' perspective the elements and events that occurred in their lives that caused them to leave school without obtaining a high school credential. The rationale for using the phenomenological approach was due to the need to understand the lived experiences and to hear from the participants in their voices their reasons for making the decision to drop out.

The participant responses to each of the research questions revealed that their experiences were similar within the high school environment, the family unit, and in their communities. The common emerging themes were identified and grouped. Merriam (2002) reported that in phenomenological studies "the experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon" (p. 7). The twelve emerging themes provided details concerning the perceptions and experiences of the participants that contributed to their decision to drop out.

Emerging Themes

Research Question 1

What social, cultural, educational and economic elements contribute to African-American males students dropping out of school? The participant responses to Research

Question 1 revealed that the lack of motivation from family members, peer influence, behavior issues in school, low socioeconomics, and the lack of applicable school curricula as contributing factors to the participant choosing to drop out. Cultural beliefs about education and lack of economic resources played a significant role in the lives of the participants.

Theme 1: Lack of motivation from family members. Lack of motivation from parents or from other close family members was a common experience. According to the participants, they were led to believe that there was little value in attending school. Seven participants reported that their family members did not care whether they attended school. The parents or family members of the research participants did not show an interest in their academic progress. Participant C stated that his family was not supportive because they were all busy with their lives. The participants had other that family members that were dropouts and they did not encourage the participants to attend school.

Participant A stated,

“One of my oldest brothers...he didn’t graduate.”

Participant F stated,

“They was ok with whatever decision that I made.”

Participant J recalled.

“My family didn’t care if I was in or out...I had other family members that had dropped out of school...so really it wasn’t no big deal. No one forced me to go...

I was pretty much on my own. So when I dropped out, I just felt that nobody really cared.”

The passive attitudes among family members played a role in the participants’ decision to drop out of school. Positive attitudes about education are essential to the development of children. Al-Fadhli and Kersen (2010) found that “the family and the quality of the relationship among its members is a particularly essential element in the development of youth’s attitudes and behavior” (p. 386). According to White and Kelly (2010), parental involvement is important in helping students to achieve academically. Additionally, the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship affects self-esteem in the schooling context (Dotterer, Lowe, & McHale, 2014). The participants developed a perception that education was not important because their parents and family members did not show an interest in encouraging them to stay in school

Theme 2: Peer relationships. Some of the participants were influence by their peers to drop out of school. Eight of the participants reported that they were influenced by their peers to skip school. Gronborg (2014) reported that the peer group culture has a fundamental influence on students’ educational pathways toward completion. The participants and their peers were engaged in the same types of defiant behaviors such as skipping school and “hanging out”. The peer relationships that were formed among 80 % of the participants revealed that their peers were uninterested in the educational process, or they were not academically engaged in the learning process.

Participant A recalled,

“We skipped school and we skipped school with young ladies and had fun like that there.”

Participant C stated,

“My friends were doing some things that I was doing, but I followed them stealing things and getting into trouble with the police...the stuff that we was doing was kinda fun at the time, but now that I look back...it was stupid...we did dumb stuff...like breaking into cars...stealing out of Walmart...taking peoples' tools...especially if they left their garage open...dumb stuff...wow now that I look at it...I was more than stupid...I could have ended up in prison...luckily...I stopped.”

Participant E commented,

“My friends (at the alternative school) were all doing the same thing I was doing. So, I wasn't no different than them. My friends, some of them dropped out, so it wasn't no thing.”

Participant H recalled,

“Basically...they didn't care. They didn't care at all 'cause they was doing the same thing as me. Most of my friends skipped school with me to go hang out and smoke.”

Skipping school resulted in absenteeism that contributed to 80% of the participants to fall behind academically.

Theme 3: Behavioral issues. Nine of the participants' responses revealed that there were numerous behavior issues that hindered their learning. Their behavior problems resulted in multiple referrals and suspensions which caused the participant to be removed from the learning environment. Participant A stated that he got "lots of referrals", he fought in school and that he stayed in "trouble" for displaying behaviors that were disruptive to the classroom environment. Behavior problems in school were identified by 90% of the participants as a reason for dropping out.

Participant A recalled,

"I got kicked out...I was just being bad...getting a lot of referrals, getting into fights...being in trouble.

Participant B stated,

"I was being the class clown...so I was being a butthole and when I got in trouble...it wasn't just one person...lots of people got in trouble with me."

Participant D said,

"I used to raise hell...when I was in school."

Participant E added,

"I always got into trouble. I had problems listening to male teachers and I did not like like authority."

Only one participant indicated that he was not a behavior problem in school. Wang and Fredricks (2014) found in their study that "behavioral and emotional engagement at school, as well as problem behavior, all influenced each other to predict the likelihood of

dropping out of school” (p. 733). Behavior problems hindered nine of the participants in this study from achieving academically because these problems resulted in out-of-school suspensions.

Theme 4: Cultural misunderstanding: The participants believed that the school officials were unable to understand their culture because they were from different backgrounds. According to Participant G, “they need to be more in tune to what is going on with the students.” Brown (2011) found that “black males either perpetuate their own educational and social experiences, or particular forces in schools and society impose on them norms that conflict with their cultural forms” (p. 57). African American males have different social and cultural experiences than their European American counterparts. According to the participants, some school officials were unaware of the social norms in their communities and misinterpreted their behaviors as anti-social behaviors.

Participant C declared,

“We come from a different background from them and things are different from the times when they was young.”

Participant D stated,

“As African Americans, we just come from totally different backgrounds.”

Participant J added,

“You just can’t approach us all in the same way...’cause we have different habits.”

African American youth are socialized in a different manner from other American ethnic groups (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010). Teachers who lack diversity training and the skills to understand how African-American male students learn can unintentionally cause these students to become disengaged. The participant responses indicated that due to the teachers being from different racial backgrounds or having a higher socio-economic status, it was difficult for them to understand the difficulties that they faced when they were away from the school environment. Allen (2015) reported that “many teachers rely on normative assumptions regarding the intellectual capacities of Black males and thus lower their academic expectations of their Black male students” (p. 72).

Theme 5: Lack of applicable school curricula. Seven of the participants’ stories revealed that the school curriculum was uninteresting and that there were very few subjects, if any, which pertained to African American studies or courses that taught real life skills. Roberts (2000) reported that meaningful curriculum reform should provide for the integration of subject matter with the nature of the student in mind. The participants’ responses revealed that the subjects that were being taught in school offered very few opportunities to learn skills to cope with the real world.

Participant A recalled,

“The history that I wanted to learn wasn’t being taught.”

Participant C stated,

“Have other subjects in school...have more activities at school that keep you in school longer.”

Participant G added,

“The teachers gotta teach more life stuff...like how to survive out here.”

Participant J recounted,

“We needed to learn lessons that would help me to be an adult and learn the right way to have a good life. School don’t teach you how to live properly...the classes that we had did not teach me about earning money the right way...what about bills and all the things that come with being an adult...they basically shoved math, reading, and writing down our throats and never showed us how it applied to real life situations.”

High school courses such as African American history or skill building courses such as accounting and finance were not being taught, and the participants indicated that the subjects that were being taught were irrelevant to their everyday lives.

Theme 6: Low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status and the lack of financial resources was a problem for nine of the participants. Of the participants, 90% had financial struggles within the family unit which played a significant role in their inability to attend school. Additionally, the participants admitted that it was more beneficial to work than to go to school because they had to help support their families.

Participant B reported,

I wanted to start working...I started working at an early age...I had to help myself and my Grandma.”

Participant F stated,

“It was best that I drop out to make some type of money.”

Participant G recalled,

“I had to make money in order to get back everything that we lost...I dropped out cause my family needed me to help out.”

Participant H added,

“I felt bad sometimes...especially when I was getting picked on by other students...I didn't have the best clothes or shoes to wear and what I had wasn't name brand. I didn't like feeling like an outcast...it is hard to fit in when everybody got better than you.”

Participant J recalled,

“They were making fun of me...for example...they were talking about my shoes 'cause they were outdated...my hair wasn't combed...my teeth were yellow...and my family was poor.

Demographics such as coming from low-income families and being male are indicators of at-risk students (Allensworth, 2005, Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 2004). Burrus and Roberts (2012) reported that poverty is one of the strongest predictors of dropout. Additionally, Hatt (2012) found that “many poor students and students of color learn early on that school is not where they belong or worth investing in, so they begin to disengage” (p. 456). The participants believed that it was more important to find work and earn an income because of financial difficulties within the family unit.

Research Question 2

What role did the relationship among African American males and school officials have in influencing them to drop out of school? Three themes emerged from the participant responses to Research Question 2. The participant responses revealed that school officials were not attentive to their needs. The participants' responses also indicated that they did not have a positive relationship with their teachers. The disciplinary plan that was implemented by the school officials was ineffective according to the stories told by the participants, and the discipline practices did very little to deter repeated behavioral offenses.

Theme 7: Lack of positive motivation from school officials. This research study showed that the most popular method of discipline used by school officials was out-of-school suspensions. According to the research, the participants that were disciplined often, indicated that school officials failed to show compassion or interest and the school officials failed to provide positive motivation that could have prevented unacceptable behaviors. Participant B indicated that he would have behaved in a more positive manner if school officials would have shown more interest in him and his education. According to the participants, school officials failed to talk to them or provide encouragement to help them to stay in school. Participant B wanted the administrators to correct his behavior, and he indicated that he would have preferred stricter disciplinary practices.

Participant B recalled,

“I feel like the administrators could have kept me in school.”

Participant D stated,

“They pretty much overlooked my needs...teachers and administrators need to pay attention to the troubled students on their level...find out what is going on.

Participant F commented,

“The administrators were not around a lot. I could have made it through if the teachers would have paid more attention and helped me.”

Participant H stated,

“The administrators should have just made sure that I was in school and not just let me hang out in the streets.”

Participant E added,

“They didn’t care whether I came or not...no one called to check on me to see where I was or why I wasn’t coming...they just left it like that...they probably was glad I wasn’t there...no care...whatsoever.”

Participant F said,

“They should have stayed on me more and made me feel that I really should be there.”

There was a common perception among the participants that school officials did not like them, and they believed that the school official did not care about their education.

Theme 8: Poor teacher relationships: The participants experienced poor relationships with teachers. The participants in this research study indicated that they believed that the teachers did not care about them, and the teachers did not show enough

interest in them or their lives. Eight of the participants revealed that the teachers failed to talk to them in a positive manner, and they failed to provide effective interventions that would have helped them to stay in school. Archer-Bank and Behar-Horenstein (2012) found that teachers should exude caring attitudes when interacting with students. Positive attention from their teachers would have been beneficial to eight of the participants. They wanted their teachers to be more attentive to their needs and provide encouragement for them to remain in school.

Participant A mentioned,

“Sometime the teachers would say some things to hurt my feelings or they would just put me out of class sometimes for no reason...no reason at all. The teachers did not show much interest and because I was bad they would call me stupid or ignorant...sometimes they would just tell me not to come.”

Participant B stated,

“Some teachers just give you a piece of paper and just sit back and don’t do what they’re supposed to and if you get it wrong...tough...you on your own.”

Participant C recalled,

“Um...sometimes...like...I would ask the teacher questions and she would brush me off or she wouldn’t give me the answers or the attention that I needed. The teachers did not pay you any attention.”

Participant D stated,

“I think that I needed for the teachers to pay more attention to me and just help me one-on-one...I needed someone who could sit next to me and show me how to do the work.”

Participant E added,

“The teachers did not care...they would brush me off or just plain ‘ol would ignore me.”

Participant B admitted that the teachers’ attitude towards him affected his ability to ask questions and, therefore, obtain the help that he needed. Teachers’ perceptions, expectations, and behaviors can impede learning for minority students (Toldson, McGee, and Lemmons, 2014). Ogbu and Simons (1998) reported that “the treatment of minority students in schools and classrooms, for example the level of teacher expectations, teacher-student interaction patterns, grouping and tracking, have an effect on their ability to adjust to the school environment and affects their performance” (p.161).

Theme 9: Lack of effective disciplinary actions to reform misbehavior. The participant responses indicated that out of school suspensions were an ineffective disciplinary action that did not deter their behaviors or rehabilitate them. The participant stories revealed that the practice of suspensions and isolation did very little to deter them from misbehaving in school. Dotterer and Lowe (2011) stated that “finding classroom context related to struggling students’ behavioral engagement also may reflect teachers’ ability to set appropriate standards for behavior” (p. 1657). According to the participants, their behavior problems were often a cry for attention. The anti-social behaviors were a

result of the student being unable to articulate effectively his needs. Participants A and C indicated that suspensions from school added to their decision to drop out and, therefore, was an ineffective method of punishment for misbehavior.

Participant A said,

“All they did was kick me out...never asked me what was wrong or how they could help me...I wish that they would have done that.”

Participant B recalled,

“Whoever would have given me swats, I would have took. I think that that would have been the best thing ever. I wasn't getting no whippings. I would have been one of the few children to benefit from getting a whipping at school...simply because I was not getting them at home...I would have liked for someone to put me back in place if I got out of line...no one tried to do that...so I pretty much did what I wanted...swats would have let me know that I couldn't have my way and they also would have let me know in a different type of way that someone was paying attention to me and wanted me to do better. They don't know how that could have helped me.”

Participant D responded,

“You know...it is more than one way that you can go about handling discipline rather than just kicking a kid out of school. Have something challenging for them to do.”

According to Cokley, McClain, Jones, and Johnson (2012), “negative experiences may cause African American males to experience psychological disengagement, academic

disidentification, and increased frustration” (p. 63). Out-of-school suspension negatively impacted 90% of the participants. The participants stated that out-of-school suspensions affected their ability to keep up with their school work and added to their poor academics.

Research Question 3

What common perceptions can be identified among African-American male students that drop out? The participant responses to Research Question 3 revealed three emerging themes, lack of African-American male role models, poor job prospects, and shame and guilt. According to the participants, dropping out of school negatively impacted their opportunities to obtain higher paying jobs.

Theme 10: Lack of African American male role models. The lack of supportive adult role models especially African-American male role models were mentioned by the participants as an unmet need. The participants’ responses revealed that they did not have very many African-American teachers or African-American male role models in their schools. The participants indicated that they did not have any opportunities to learn life skills from positive African-American male role models. There were very few opportunities for interactions with successful African American males and Participant H stated that he grew up in a neighborhood where “police activity was common.” According to Participant H’s perspective, there were not any successful African-American males in his community.

Participant A stated,

“Maybe they could be a...what would...you say...a um mentor...get a male role model or a female role model to encourage the person to stay in school.”

Participant J stated,

“They could have provided us with some better role models.”

The participants indicated that they did not have African American male role models in their communities that could show them how to be productive adults. Slack, Johnson, Dodor, and Woods (2013) found that “a major key to educating our students and helping them navigate through the difficult teen years is to have a caring adult who spends time with them, develops a positive mentoring relationship, and becomes an advocate for their success” (p. 9).

Theme 11: Poor job prospects. The participants revealed that dropping out of school had an adverse effect on their personal lives. Two of the participants were unemployed. Eight of the participants were employed, but they were earning low wages, and they indicated that their lack of a high school diploma prevented them from obtaining a better job.

Participant B stated,

“Well...it has been hard to get a good job. You can get a better job if you stay in school.”

Participant D recalled,

“I actually had a temp job and I was actually supposed to get hired on that temp job as a permanent...um once they found out that I didn't have a diploma...they let me go.

Participant F added,

“Well, I found me a job that I am comfortable with...but it don't have high pay.”

Participant H said,

“I can't get no high paying job...so I just cut grass and do yards for people so that everything will be alright.”

According to the participant stories, the fact that they did not have a high school diploma prevented them from obtaining jobs that would yield more income.

Theme 12: Shame and guilt. All of the participants expressed regrets about dropping out of school. “Low self-esteem, a low expectancy of future success, hopelessness, helplessness, shame, and humiliation promotes the decision to drop out of school” (Weiner, 2010, p. 33). The participants believed that a high school diploma would have made their positions in life better.

Participant A expressed,

“But now when I look back...I see that I was a fool...everybody laughing didn't always mean a good thing. I wish that I could take it all back and start over again...the teachers didn't deserve to have to put up with me clowning and then trying to teach the class.”

Participant C stated,

“Sometimes it takes a moment for people to realize how their decisions affect themselves and others.”

Participant G responded,

“I get kinda embarrassed when I run into somebody that I went to school with and they know that I dropped out...I don't want that for my kids.”

Participant J added,

“Sometimes I say...I'ma get my GED...but I can't take the time to do it. I want to...to make things better for my kids...so they don't go down the same path.”

The themes that emerged revealed the complex nature of the dropout problem.

African American male students develop disengagement behaviors because they are unable to build positive relationships with the adults in their schools or their families. Corprew and Cunningham (2012) stated that the “experiences of African American males are associated with stereotypes and negative experiences” (p. 585). When school officials engage in imposing negative stereotypes upon African-American male at risk students, it affects their self-perception and prevent these students from feeling accepted. As a result, this at-risk group will seek out people and environments that are more accepting. Stereotypes also affect African American male students by causing stress and ultimately they may have psychological consequences (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Taylor and Walton (2011) added that negative stereotypes interfere with how well students learn course materials. In order to promote a better high school experience for African-

American male students, school officials must ensure that the school environment meets their needs. Key components that would promote a successful high school experience for African-American male students are positive relationships with teachers and administrators, encouragement from parents and peers and meaningful interactions with caring adult role models.

Discrepant Cases

Two discrepant cases were found in the research data. The discrepant cases indicated that the participants understood the importance of a high school credential. Participant B dropped out of high school, but he was able to obtain a certificate in auto mechanics at Florida State College at Jacksonville. Additionally, Participant D hired a tutor to help him learn the things that he was unable to grasp while in school; however due to financial problems, he was unable to continue the services of the tutor and, therefore, made the decision to drop out.

Participant B stated,

“I did go to FSCJ to be an auto mechanic and I got my certificate in that...but after then...I didn't do much of anything.”

Participant D recalled,

“I can learn...I just need someone to show me how to do things rather than make me learn it on my own.” “I went to the college and got a tutor and I paid \$26 a day to try and get tutored for my GED cause I had already dropped out of school and I didn't want things to get worse.”

The fact that Participants B and D continued to pursue an education in spite of dropping out proved that they could have been successful in achieving a high school credential if they would have been given the proper guidance and support in pursuing an education. Harper and Davis (2012) reported that “Black men do care about education; despite their recognition of how schools, post-secondary institutions, and policies unfairly disadvantage them” (p. 116). These two cases added to the research findings because they revealed that the participants were willing to obtain an education but obstacles in their personal lives hindered them from doing so.

Patterns, Relationships, and Themes

Several patterns, themes, and relationships emerged during the data collection process. The patterns that emerged from this research study included participant apprehension and reluctance to speak openly about being a high school dropout. It was difficult to find African American males who dropped out of school who were willing to tell their stories. The participants were embarrassed about dropping out of school. There were some hostility and fear during the initial contact; however after careful explanation, the participants were more agreeable about telling their stories.

The participants believed that their relationships with their peers helped them to cope with dropping out. The participants indicated that their friends played a significant role in their decision to drop out because they were having the same social and educational problems. The participants did not have good relationships with their teachers or their administrators. Nine of the participants felt that the teachers did not care

about them, and they explained that they could not obtain the educational assistance that they needed in order to be successful in the classroom. Participants A, B, D, and G, talked about getting into trouble in school which caused multiple out-of-school suspensions. Only one participant admitted that he had a positive relationship with his teachers. Nine of the participants were reared in households that did not have a father figure or a male head of household. One participant was raised by his father, but he lost his father at an early age, and this loss contributed to his inability to cope with the demands of high school. The five participants who stated that they had children reported that they had good relationships with their children. Seven of the ten participants had trouble with the law and had spent time in jail or prison. Three were unemployed at the time of the interview.

The themes that emerged included the lack of one-to-one educational opportunities, skipping school and being disliked by teachers and administrators as drop out factors. Referrals and getting into trouble such as fighting in school, disrupting the class, or other anti-social behaviors hindered their progress. The participants reported that more attention from the teacher was needed for them to remain in school. According to the stories told by the African American males who participated in this study, support and guidance from their parents and school officials was needed in order for them to remain in school.

Evidence of Quality

Member checking by the participants and peer debriefing conducted by a colleague ensured the accuracy of research data and validated that the writing of this dissertation was an exact representation of the participants' perceptions and experiences. The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed data from the recorded interviews two times, and they were read the transcriptions to ensure that their voices were accurately represented (Appendix C). Two interviews were conducted using eight interview questions, and the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, investigative manner. Two of the initial interviews were face-to-face interviews while eight were conducted by phone. The second interviews were conducted to obtain clarification of the responses given to the questions during the first interview, and they were all held by phone. The final interview was also held by phone, and the participants checked the final transcriptions to ensure that their words were interpreted correctly.

Summary

The stories told by each of the participants' in this qualitative phenomenological study added insight into the dropout problem in northern Florida among African American male students. In northern Florida, African American males drop out at a higher rate than any other ethnic groups. The purpose of this study was to identify some of the common experiences and perceptions that exist among African American males in northern Florida that lead them to make the decision to drop out. Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin (as cited in Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012) reported that

“research suggests that African American students’ beliefs about self and race are closely related to (a) their educational and social development, (b) their perceptions regarding the value of education, and (c) to their current realities” (p. 201). In Section 4, the results of the data that were collected from ten African American male dropouts were discussed.

The results of the data collected supported the three research questions that were the foundation of this study. The data were collected by audio recording and note taking to ensure that the data directly represented the participant’s intentions and thoughts. The data were transcribed and analyzed by using an open coding system to identify patterns, relationships, and common themes. Research Question 1 referred to the social, cultural, educational, economic elements that contributed to the participant choosing to drop out of school. The social and cultural elements that affected the dropouts were peer associations and social acceptance within the family unit. Being reared in a single parent household was also a contributing element in the participants’ decision to drop out. The educational factors that affected their decision to drop out were related to class size, the lack of one-to-one attention from the teacher, and the inability to garner the assistance that they required to be successful in school. The economic elements that affected the dropouts were an overall economic disadvantage within their communities and the family unit. Research Question 2 involved understanding how the relationships with school officials influenced the participant to drop out of school. The participant responses to Research Question 2 revealed that 80% of the participants had school experiences that involved teachers who did not recognize their need for special attention or teachers who did not

seem to care about their academic attainment. The participants' decision to drop out was also related to poor relationships with teachers, the teachers' attitudes towards them, and an overall feeling of not being cared for or wanted. Research Question 3 involved understanding the common perceptions that the participants had about dropping out. According to the data recorded in reference to Research Question 3, the general experience of the participants included the inability to effectively transition from middle school to high school, the inability to adjust to the independence that high school offered students, and the lack of motivation from key family members, i.e. their mothers were not active participants in the educational process.

According to the stories told by the research participants, several elements were combined that led to the decision to drop out. Many of the elements that contributed to the decision to drop out were non-academic factors. The research revealed that peer influences, low teacher expectations, lack of support and motivation from family members as well as school officials, and low socioeconomic status were contributing factors that affected the lives of these young African American men and each contributed to the participants' inability to remain in school.

Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to find out why the dropout rate for African American males in northern Florida schools eclipsed the dropout rate of all other ethnic groups. The motivation to pursue this study was to find out if there were common high school experiences among African American males that affected their decision to drop out. Prior research studies observed statistical drop out data and explained the drop out problem from a quantitative stand point. Jackson (2010) and Schargel and Smink (2014) analyzed African American male dropout rates, but these scholars did not address the personal perceptions or experiences of African American males that contribute to the dropout problem.

The literature review was an overview of research studies on African American males who drop out of high school. In North Florida, 40% of the African American male students who are eligible to graduate fail to do so (FDOE, 2013). In order to obtain information and examine the dropout rate from the perspectives of the African American male drop out, three research questions were used to guide this analysis:

1. What social, cultural, educational and economic elements contribute to African American male students dropping out of school?
2. What role did the relationship among African American males and school officials have in influencing them to drop out of school?
3. What common perceptions can be identified among African American male students that drop out?

Eight interview questions were aligned with the research questions and were designed to obtain answers that reflected of the experiences of the participants. An open coding system was used to cluster themes and group data. As the common threads of data emerged, tables were created to show the alignment to the research questions.

The findings of this study involved gaining an understanding of the perceptions of 10 participants who told their stories about their experiences prior to making the decision to drop out of school. Research Question 1 involved understanding the social, cultural, and educational factors that contributed to dropping out. Nine of the participants revealed that their decision to drop out was effected by school-related factors such as suspensions and discipline issues. Discipline issues were not a factor for only one participant. Social issues such as peer influence and inadequate motivation from family members were cited as a reason for dropping out.

Research Question 2 was used to identify the role that the participant relationships with school officials played in their decision to drop out. Nine of the participants were unable to have a positive relationship with school officials. Encounters with school officials mainly involved disciplinary actions such as referrals and suspensions. The negative relationships with school officials led the participants to believe that they did not belong in the school environment.

The purpose of Research Question 3 was to address the common perceptions of the research participants related to their need for positive African American role models and the effect that dropping out had on their lives. The participants acknowledged that an

African American male role model or mentor would have been a positive aspect of their school experience. All of the participants explained that dropping out caused feelings of embarrassment, and the stigma made it difficult to obtain better job opportunities.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section, I present the findings based on the common experiences of the participants that caused them to make the decision to drop out of school. Finn (1989) found that dropping out is the result of a long “process of disengagement” (p. 133). According to the stories told by the research participants, poor relationships with teachers and administrators, ineffective school discipline practices, and peer pressure contributed to their decision to drop out. The relationships that can develop between African American male students and school personnel should be investigated to determine how these relationships are formed and the role that these relationships play in promoting academic success (Howard, 2013).

In RQ1, I examined social, cultural, educational, and economic elements such as family and peer relationships and financial resources. Some of these aspects in the lives of children cannot be controlled by the educational institution; however, the impact of these elements played a role in the dropout decision of the participants in this study. The participants revealed that their relationships with their peers hindered their ability to benefit from the educational process due to skipping that resulted in excessive absences. Two participants revealed that their peers were a positive influence and that they encouraged them to attend school. Nine of the participants reported that they lacked

strict parental guidance and, therefore, became a discipline problem that contributed to an unpleasant school experience. The participants entered school with the desire to learn, but distractions outside of the school environment inhibited their academic progress.

The results of RQ2 provided an understanding of how the relationships that evolved between the school officials and the participant affected their desire to stay in school. The participants outlined their beliefs that the teachers did not care about them, and this knowledge made them feel unwanted and they internalized this feeling and thought that it was best to stay out of school. Only one participant reported good relationships with teachers. Encouragement and support from teachers was found to be an important element in promoting academic success (Bowen, Hopson, Rose, & Glennie, 2012). The participants also reported that the courses that were being taught in school did not adequately teach them the skills that they needed in order to cope with life in their environment, and they believed that educational institutions should create courses that they could relate to as African American men. Crumpton and Gregory (2011) found that students become more actively engaged in learning when they find the coursework interesting and relevant. Archambault et al. (as cited in Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013) reported that low quality classroom instruction and the lack of meaningful curricula can lead students to drop out. Vilson (2015) reported that teaching is a predominantly European American profession, and there are few teachers who are African American males. The participants believed that due to some of the teachers being from different backgrounds, they were culturally misunderstood. In addition to

perceptions of cultural misunderstanding, the ethnicity of teachers have been found to have a significant influence on positive teacher-student relationships and increases positive academic achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011).

In the results of the analysis of RQ3, I found that there were several common perceptions that developed among African American males who dropped out of schools in northern Florida. The themes that emerged from RQ3 were related to the participants' desire for attention from caring adults and their need for structured education and more opportunities to earn a better income. Self-determination and motivation in students is developed from their life experiences and their school experiences (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). All of the participants wanted more attention from their parents and teachers and believed that this aspect would have aided them in remaining in school in spite of environmental obstacles. Witte and Rogge (2013) reported that when parents are highly educated, their children receive more educational support, and they are more likely to understand the importance of obtaining a high school diploma. Seven of the participants were fortunate to find jobs; however, they earn minimum wages. The three participants who were unemployed worked odd jobs to provide for their families. Dropping out of school affected the participants' ability to compete for better paying jobs.

The findings of this study supported the conceptual framework based on Ogbu's (2003) oppositional cultural theory which focused on the school experiences of African American students. Ogbu found that African American students have poor school experiences because they enter the environment with a preconceived notion that they do

not belong there. Poor self-esteem and cultural expectations stifle both the academic achievement and intellectual achievement of African American male students within the school environment. Teacher expectations also limited the ability of these students to excel in the school. Teacher expectations affect how students learn and it influences positive academic success (Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010). The participants believed that the teachers treated them poorly because they were labeled as discipline problems. The preconceived notions of the teacher made the participants feel defeated and unwanted. The participants experienced discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions that singled them out and ostracized them from the learning environment. Continuous suspensions were a factor in the dropout decision based on the participants' stories. Zablocki and Krezmien (2013) reported that disciplinary exclusion affected academics and increased the likelihood that a student would drop out. Out-of-school suspensions led to additional time lost from the classroom and contributed to the academic failure of the participants.

Practical Applications

The practical applications related to the findings of this study are that teachers and administrators need to identify at-risk students the moment that they enter the ninth grade. Burrus and Roberts (2012) reported that approximately 80% of the students who are classified as at risk during the eighth and ninth grade drop out of high school. Analysis of middle school discipline and academic records should be done prior to the start of high school for entering students to allow for early identification of at-risk

students. A tracking system should be developed after entry into the ninth grade to monitor the progress of at-risk students. An individualized success plan should be created that would appropriately address the issues related to the students' achievement, and effective interventions should be implemented when problems arise. Individualized success plans should involve the active participation of both the parent and the student and should include a program that would outline individual academic and behavioral goals, effective methods of accomplishing plan goals, and rewards and incentives.

According to the findings of this study, African American male students require more support and guidance in understanding how to cope effectively within the school environment. The stories told by the participants in this study could be used by community leaders to prevent other students who display some of the same characteristics from dropping out. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) noted that students who become disengaged experience academic difficulties, associate with peers who are disengaged, and are less likely to have positive relationships with their teachers. Using the identifiers from the participant stories may help teachers and school administrators to reach out to students who display antisocial behaviors. Wang and Eccles (2013) suggested that students develop a sense of value in the learning process and misconduct is reduced when teachers are supportive. Teachers and administrators should be more attentive to the needs of at-risk African American male students and implement individualized success plans that will effectively increase the retention rate of these students.

Teachers and administrators could also implement better disciplinary procedures such as peer pairing and the peer review board that would work with at-risk students to limit out of school suspensions. Vincent, Tobin, Hawkin, and Frank (2012) suggested that interventions that are culture specific provide additional support and may be effective in decreasing at risk behaviors. Teachers and administrators should learn more about the cultures of African American male students and keep parents informed when problems arise and work closely with the student to improve problem behaviors.

Implications for Social Change

Social change related to the dropout problem among at-risk African-American males cannot occur until leaders and school officials address the social and cultural issues faced by the students and accept that these students have different experiences, outlooks, and perspective of education and life. When freshmen enter high school, they are expected to be more responsible and adapt to larger classes and more coursework (Schiller, 1999). The transition from middle school to high school can be overwhelming for students. The adjustment is troubling for African American male at-risk students, and school officials and community leaders need to develop training and orientation courses that would better serve these students. Gronborg (2013) and Harper and Davis (2012) identified the cause of African American dropouts and confirmed that several factors surrounding the students' personal lives and their school experiences contribute to the drop out decision. Noguera (2012) reported that the many of the challenges that men of color face involve other factors such as hunger and poverty and are independent of the

educational process and essentially make providing them an education more difficult.

The reasons for leaving school often vary; however, common threads exist that should be addressed within the educational system. The participants told their stories based on their experiences and understanding of the social and educational aspects of the schooling process. The participants believed that they were misunderstood by their teachers, and this factor contributed to their inability to function in the school setting. The lack of time and attention from teachers led the participants to give up on the learning process.

The reasons why African American male students drop out of school at such a high rate is relevant to social change because understanding and addressing the issues related to this phenomenon could lead to more educated, productive people who could make positive contributions to society. This study did not address grade retention, but this factor should be reviewed as an indicator for dropping out. It is important for educators to understand how African American male students perceive the world around them and the impact of the social burdens in their lives. The study participants revealed that better relationships with teachers and administrators are imperative for at-risk students to thrive in the complex high school environment. According to the data obtained in this study, teacher attitudes and lack of concern for the individual amplified feelings of inadequacy and contributed to the African American male students' disconnection from the educational institution.

The dropout out problem must be examined in terms of addressing the needs of African American male students. Zablocki and Krezmien (2013) stated that a high school

diploma is a minimum requirement for many jobs in today's society due to innovations in technology. As a result of dropping out, 70% of the participants experienced incarceration that was either related to drugs or theft crimes. For African American males to lead productive lives, they must obtain a high school credential. Specific school and community programs that are aimed at decreasing the dropout rate are imperative to prevent at-risk students from making the decision to drop out. The themes that emerged from this study provided insight into the dropout problem among this vulnerable group and provided a rationale for teachers, administrators, and community leaders to implement changes within the school system in order to improve the school experiences of these students that could potentially lead to the successful achievement of a graduation credential. Alternative education programs and flexible scheduling could reduce the number of African American males who dropout and could potentially increase the workforce. To foster social change the following suggestions are recommended:

1. Teachers and school leaders should work together to reduce out of school suspensions by implementing a peer review board that would address alternatives to suspensions.
2. Partnerships should be formed with African American male business leaders to become mentors for at-risk students.
3. Community leaders should create programs and after-school centers that would cater specifically to African American male at-risk students that

would provide tutoring and support that would assist these students in coping in the school environment.

4. Teach social interaction courses and life skills courses to increase their chances to become successful adults.
5. Create courses that would show African-American male at-risk students the importance of being able to transition from high school to college.

Social change would be created when schools and communities understand the reasons why African American males drop out of school and when caring adults commit to making changes in how these students are motivated and educated. Schools, communities, and the nation as a whole would benefit from increasing the graduation rate of this vulnerable population. More educated African American males would mean an increase in the workforce, an increase in tax revenues for the states and communities in which they live, and a decrease in crime rates nationwide.

Recommendations for Action

The dropout problem among African American male students is not limited to the school experience, but it is also dependent upon external factors beyond the school environment. It is important to note what leads to the dropout problem among African American male students to address this growing problem. Students who are encouraged to excel academically and engage in positive educational experiences gain long-term skills that assist them in becoming healthy adults (Wang and Eccles, 2014; Wang and

Holcombe, 2010). The following recommendations for action are presented in an effort to assist this high-risk group.

For Teachers:

1. Diversity training for teachers and administrators should be implemented that effectively addresses the social and economic issues facing African American students in today's societies.
2. Teachers and administrators should create a school-wide individualized success plan for at-risk students that is tailored to meet the needs of each individual student.
3. Teachers need to work together in teams and provide more individual opportunities for at-risk students to get academic assistance and learn.

For Students:

1. An effective discipline plan should be created that limits out of school suspensions.
2. Counseling should be available to help students learn how to correct the anti-social behaviors that place them at risk.
3. Pairing at-risk students with peers who have exhibited success in the school environment or mentors should be established at the school level and implemented as part of the success plan.
4. Night school programs should be implemented in order to meet the needs of students who are unable to attend the regular day school program.

5. Life skill courses and interpersonal skills should be taught at the high school level so that these students can learn the skills necessary to become productive adults and function in today's society.

Although there are some factors that cannot be controlled by educational institutions such as relationships within the family and interactions with peers, schools must be proactive in teaching students the skills that would help them to overcome these obstacles. Three additional recommendations or courses of action for teachers and administrators are added as additional suggestions for action. First, I recommend that smaller class sizes are implemented at the high school level to meet the needs of every student in the class. Students who are at-risk have a difficult time concentrating in classrooms where there is a large student to teacher ratio.

Second, the results of this study revealed that school officials need to find more effective ways to communicate with students and understand the problems that result in school failure. In addition, community leaders need to work closely with school to implement carry over programs within the community that address the problems that economically disadvantaged communities face. School officials should work with community leaders in creating more opportunities for at-risk students to work and earn wages while working towards a high school credential.

Finally, I recommend that school curricula are developed that effectively teaches at-risk students skills that will enable them to become productive citizens. Courses should be structured in a manner to address the issues of the cultural differences that exist

among African American male students and students of other ethnic backgrounds.

Understanding the dynamics of the African American male experience is vital to address the needs of this group.

Recommendations for Dissemination

This study was conducted because of the growing dropout problem among African-American male students. The dropout problem is not isolated to schools in northern Florida; it is a problem for schools across the nation. Upon approval from Walden University, this information would be shared with teachers and administrators throughout northern Florida school districts. Copies of this dissertation would be shared with school leaders and teachers to make them aware of the perceptions that African American male at-risk students have concerning school. An open discussion or forum should be held to find practical ways to address the needs of these students. Teacher training and workshops should be conducted that focus on cultural awareness and address the effects that social stigmas have on African American children. The findings of this research should be shared at school-wide professional leadership conferences (PLC's), national TEACH conferences, faculty meetings, and principal leadership meetings. New teacher in-services and orientations should be conducted on a national level that would include strategies to address practical applications to improve how at-risk African-American male students are educated. Community leaders and church officials should be included in this dissemination, as well as alternative school program leaders and youth counselors.

Recommendations for Further Study

More research is necessary to explore some of the additional factors that affect the dropout rate among African American male students. A comparison study should be conducted to determine if there are similarities or differences among other ethnic groups that affect the dropout decision. Exploration of a larger sample group should be conducted in order to isolate other factors that contribute to the dropout rate among other populations.

In order to determine if there is a relationship between teacher background and the retention rates of at-risk students, more research should be conducted. A mixed methods study design should be conducted to align the dropout data with the actual experiences of the student. Researchers should consider the impact that teacher background, characteristics, and attitudes have on the dropout rate. I recommend conducting additional research that would target the teachers' experience in educating at-risk African American students.

Finally, I recommend that future researchers on this subject matter explore the psychological impact that dropping out has on African American males. Feelings of inadequacy and insignificance must be properly addressed to build positive self-esteem in African American male students. An understanding of the mental effects of dropping should be examined in to provide insight into the long-term issues that may be a result of this problem.

Reflection on Researcher's Experience

My perception of the African American male drop out has evolved, due to the results of this study. Prior to conducting this study, I believed that African American male dropouts were unwilling to obtain an education; however the participants in this study revealed that African American males are interested in education, but some obstacles that are unrelated to the school environment prevent them from achieving academically. While conducting this study, I got the opportunity to meet some very nice young men who were ashamed of the fact that they did not have a high school diploma, however as a result of being a part of this study, they were all more positive about the possibility of getting a high school credential. Shame and guilt are psychological effects of dropping out amplified by “racism, social injustice, intergenerational racial trauma, issues of poverty and inequity of education opportunities that lead to stress, depression, psychological distress, and anxiety for African-American youth” (Curry, 2010, p. 407). The participants were willing to help others to understand how dropping out of school adversely affected their lives. During the debriefing sessions, the participants became more comfortable with answering the research questions and opened up about their lived experiences. The participants were young men who had upbeat spirits and maintained a sense of pride about their children and families. When I asked them about the advice that they would give other dropouts, they were adamant about telling others to stay in school and graduate. The participants did not want to see other young men follow the path that

they had taken. The participants explained some the difficulties that they have faced in life because of their decision to drop out.

As a result of this study, I have found that teachers' perceptions and beliefs can adversely affect a students' willingness to be an active member in the classroom environment. In order for children to excel academically, they must be supported by adults (Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). As an educator, this research study has allowed me an opportunity to examine ways that I could effectively assist at-risk students and help them in the transition process from middle school to high school. Hawkins, Jaccard and Needle (2013) reported that it is important to eliminate nonacademic factors that arise during the middle-school years in order to promote the academic success of "at-risk" students. During this research study, I found that the young men who participated in this study accepted their position in life, and they did not place all of the blame on the schools or the teachers for their failure. The men in this study accepted the fact that they were responsible for obtaining their high school credential. Each of these men believed that more guidance from a caring adult could have possibly prevented them from making the decision to drop out of school.

The stories told by these participants revealed that educators are missing key indicators when addressing the needs of African-American male students. Indicators such as acting out and anti-social behaviors should be examined closely to prevent dropouts. "Students' perceptions of supportive student-teacher relationships may help to establish a sense of community or build a connection to the school and therefore reduce

the risk of emotional distress and increase support of socially acceptable behavior” (Wang & Dishion, 2012, p. 50). Every child deserves an opportunity to be heard and more importantly understood. The stories told by these young men helped me to understand that in order to reach my at-risk students, I must find innovative ways to teach them. Before conducting this study, I viewed African American male dropouts as lazy students who were unwilling to learn. The results of this study indicated that, “African American males are heavily influenced by their teachers’ perceptions of their ability to be successful” (Lynn, Bacon, Trotten, & Bridges, 2010, p. 298). According to the participant responses in this study, these students are not lazy or reluctant learners, but they are broken due to environmental and social factors that inhibit their ability to function effectively in classrooms with large student bodies. I discovered that African American male students who may be at risk need one-on-one attention and would benefit from smaller classes and an individualized success plan. African American male students often find that the subjects that are being taught are irrelevant to their lives. As an educator, I must consider the obstacles that these students may be facing and find ways to help them to stay in school.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study provided validity to the African American male dropout problem in northern Florida from the experiences of students whose lives were affected by dropping out. It would be easy to ignore the dropout problem among African American male students, but the impact upon society would be

too devastating. The participants in this study hold on to hope that their stories would bring positive changes within the school system. Stakeholders, school officials, teachers and government agencies would benefit from examining these experiences to create positive educational experiences for all at-risk students. It is imperative that we understand how African American male at-risk students perceive school and their environment in order create targeted programs that will meet their needs and promote higher school retention rates. Fall and Roberts (2012) found that “when teachers show interest in students, praise their efforts, and contribute to community building within the school, they directly influence students’ perception of self and nurture students’ level of school engagement” (p. 795). Additionally, when students feel like they belong in the school environment, they thrive academically and psychologically (Apprey, Preston-Grime, Bassett, Lewis, & Rideau, 2014).

Finally, educational institutions must examine the positive impact that African American male role models and teachers have when it comes to educating African American boys. “Although the call for more Black male teachers makes good sense, little discussion occurs within educational institutions concerning the positioning the Black male teacher as the ideal pedagogue and role model for the Black male student” (Brown, 2012, p. 297). It is important that school boards consider the lack of African-American male educators in schools who could serve as positive role models and how this deficiency impacts at-risk African-American male students. Guidance from successful African American role models would provide at-risk students with a tangible

example of success beyond high school. Obama (2014) stated that “We have got to give more of these young men access to mentors” (p. 8) in response to the problems faced by boys of color. Kafele (2012) reported that African-American males need more opportunities to interact and learn from role models that they could identify with in order to maximize their learning and educational experiences. The African American male dropout problem should not continue to be ignored and labeled as a minority problem. Educators and government officials must implement relevant, effective programs that will address the needs of our vulnerable populations to bridge the gap between the educational achievement levels of minority students and their European American counterparts. Teachers and administrators should focus on “programs that are designed to prevent co-occurring risk behaviors before they start” (Sterrett, Dymnicki, Henry, Byck, Bollard, & Mustanski, 2014, p. 386). Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) emphasized that “what is needed is a deeper understanding of the specific risk experiences that hinder educational well-being such that comprehensive interventions serving young African American boys are able to target necessary program services to children most vulnerable to school failure” (p. 573). The dropout problem for African American males and African Americans in general continues to be a growing problem throughout this country. Rumberger (2011) reported that “dropouts suffer in a number of ways—they are less likely to find a job and, once employed, are less likely to earn enough money to live, compared to more educated workers; they have poor health; they are more likely to commit crimes and to be incarcerated; and they are less likely to vote” (p. 14).

Dropping out is not just a problem that affects the productivity rates of educational institutions, but it also has long reaching effects on the economy and communities in which dropouts live. The dropout problem should be addressed on a national level and governments and educational leaders need to make a concerted effort to provide teachers and schools with the tools that are necessary to retain students in school. Transformation within educational systems now would help to promote the development of future citizens that will be able to make positive contributions to our world.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Describe your likes and dislikes about public school.
2. What school factors contributed to your decision to drop out?
3. What family factors contributed to your decision to drop out?
4. What peer related factors contributed to your decision to drop out?
5. What do you think the administrators at the school could have done in order to keep you motivated and therefore remain in school?
6. What do you think the teachers at the school could have done in order to keep you motivated and therefore remain in school?
7. What suggestions would you give to the teachers, principals, or other staff members that would prevent others from dropping out?
8. What affect has dropping out had on you and your family?

Appendix B: Participant Responses to Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J
<i>Describe your likes/dislikes about public school.</i>	Meeting different people/Being mistreated	It was fun/Some of the classes & Teachers	The girls/Teachers	The girls & freedom/Administrators, Discipline, Class size	It was fun/The teachers	Some classes/The teachers	The girls/The teachers	The girls/The teachers	It was fun/Reading	Meeting other kids/The teachers
<i>What school related factors contributed to your decision to drop out?</i>	Too many referrals and being in trouble	Teachers' attitudes and being mistreated	The rules and the no attention from teachers	The teachers and couldn't get help	The teachers did not care and getting into trouble	The teachers did not care and attention from the teachers	The teachers did not care	Large classes	Large school	Location of the school
<i>What family factors contributed to your decision to drop out?</i>	Family tried to motivate me, but what I wanted to learn was not being taught	No parent, I was raised by my Grandma	Family tried to encourage me, but no real support	Mom told me and all	My family tried to encourage me	They didn't care and Mom couldn't take care of us	Family got split up	Family wanted me to stay in school	My Dad died	My family didn't care
<i>What peer related factors contributed to your decision to drop out?</i>	We skipped school	Some friends tried to help me	They encouraged me to skip school	Some were making the same decisions that I was making	My friends were all doing the same thing	My friends wanted me to stay in school	Some friends stayed out here in the streets with me	My friends skipped school with me	My friends were not going to school	We skipped school together
<i>What do you think the administrators could have done in order to keep you motivated and therefore remain in school?</i>	Motivated me	They could have kept me in school	Have more things to keep us in school	They could have talked to me	They did not care	They should have stayed on me more	They should have stayed on the teachers	They should have made sure that I was in school	They could be more hands on	Encouraged us to stay in school
<i>What do you think that the teachers at the school could have done in order to keep you motivated and therefore remain in school?</i>	There really wasn't no guidance	Do one-on-one tutoring	Make it more fun...interesting in our type of way	They could have talked to me	They did not offer help	Put me in a class with less students	Do a better job of teaching stuff that pertains to the student	Paid more attention to what I was doing	Be more aware of the kids	Find out what was going on
<i>What suggestions would you give to the teachers, principals, or other staff members that would prevent others from dropping out?</i>	Try to motivate	Just talk with them	More one-to-one	Learn your students and about them	Pay attention to the troubled students	Be there for the students and encourage them to stay in school	They need to teach more one-on-one	Be more one-on-one with the students	Show the kids that they care about them	Be sensitive to the students' needs
<i>What affect has dropping out had on you and your family?</i>	Low paying jobs	It's been hard to get a good job	I can't get a good job	It is real hard to find a job	I don't have a job	I don't have high pay	I can't make as much money	I have a hard time getting a job	I can't find a good job	I don't have the best paying job

Appendix C: Permission to Conduct Study



Date: 01-23-2015



RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear: Director

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study of adults who attended school in [redacted] but were unable to complete a high school diploma. I am asking for your assistance in obtaining research participants so that I may collect data for my study. I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Walden University and I am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of the Dropout Problem Among African American Males in North Florida. I am interested in learning about the experiences and perceptions that the participant experienced that caused them to choose to drop out of school.

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit 10 young men from the school to anonymously complete a 1-page questionnaire (copy enclosed). Due to the nature of the study, I hope to recruit potential participants anonymously.

If approval is granted, each participant will complete an audio recorded interview in a classroom or other quiet setting at the school setting or other private setting at a time convenient for the participant. The interview process should take no longer than (30 min.). The results will be pooled for the dissertation project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either your school/center or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: adrianna.davis@waldenu.edu.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the form by e-mail or postal mail. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at your institution. If you have any questions, you may contact me by e-mail at adrianna.davis@waldenu.edu or call me at (904) 608-9639 or (904) 630-6800 ext. 1344. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Adrianna Davis
Student
Walden University
Enclosures
cc: Dr. James Miller, Chairperson

Approved by:



Print your name and title here Signature

2/3/2015
Date