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High School Drop Outs with Learning Disabilities in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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Tanya M. Lockhart

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2019

Abstract

High School Drop Outs with Learning Disabilities in the

U.S. Virgin Islands

by

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MA, Cambridge College, 2001

BS, Nova Southeastern University, 1998

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

A decline in high school dropout rates of students with learning disabilities (SWLDs) has been reported in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). Of the 2 school districts in the USVI, St. STT/STJ and STX, the researcher examined high school experiences of SWLDs who dropped out and did not attain a high school diploma in STX. Utilizing the conceptual framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, participants' personal high school experiences were examined in an effort to understand factors leading to their choice to drop out. The researcher interviewed 12 participants who were drop out SWLDs, ages 18 years and older. Interview data were coded and analyzed for common themes. Member checking and peer debriefing were utilized to achieve credibility and trustworthiness. Data analysis resulted in the identification of patterns, or themes, relative to participants' STX high school experiences which contributed to their decisions to drop out. The themes included, peer, family and teacher lack of support, ridicule, peer pressure and behavior problems. Most of the participants had not reached Maslow's highest need for self-actualization. Maslow purported that if needs are not being fulfilled in homes, then they can be fulfilled in schools where a positive school culture is apparent. In this case, students with learning disabilities needed to feel there was value in their education and obtaining a high school diploma. The results of this research might contribute to positive social change by identifying SWLDs' need requirements to attain a high school diploma and provide high school administrators with valuable information to enhance school learning environments for SWLDs and increase high school SWLD graduation rates.

High School Drop Outs with Learning Disabilities in the
U.S. Virgin Islands

by

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Dedication

Praise God, I am finally here! This has been a long journey only God, my family, and my chair will understand. I have given birth twice. I was in labor for years with my second child with many complications (many edits on my prospectus and experiencing Hurricane Irma and Maria 12 days apart in 2017). Funny as this may sound, I dedicate three fourths of my doctoral study to Hurricane Irma and Maria. These hurricanes have shown me that life does not stop but can go on. Dedication is given to my first heartbeat, my pride, my joy, and my backbone of support, although she may not see it. She has been my inspiration during my journey of learning, teaching, and writing— my beautiful daughter, T'Anna.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength and the ability to persevere throughout this long arduous journey in which I couldn't see no end to this flight. This has been a lifelong dream that is now fulfill a reality.

I wish to acknowledge my village that has made this voyage possible. This village has raised me to become who I am today, both with integrity and professionalism:

- Richard and Alda Lockhart, the courageous and dynamic duo from battling cancer, raising their grandkids, to loving me unconditionally when I was most vulnerable
- Aunty Pat this is for you, my second mother who couldn't finish hers
- My talented, creative daughter T'Anna that was patient and brought the joys of laughter when I needed it most
- My siblings, Tisha, Tricia, and Tremain, when one hurt all hurt, when one cry all cry. We feel each other's pain and give support when needed. We are each other's keeper.
- My special friend forever, the one I can call any hour of the night, Mikey, Mr. Google, Mr. Microsoft Word, Mr. APA, Mr. Fix it. Many thanks.
- My committee of nationally recognized scholars,
 - Dr. Karen Slonski, my "Wind beneath my wings" without you I would have never made it to this most monumental milestone.
 - Dr. Kathleen Domino my only regret is that I was not fortunate enough to start off with you as my second committee chair. But as

we can see it's not how you start that determines your success, it's how you finish and I thank you

- Dr. Karen Hunt, my URR advisor, very detailed and resourceful. I thank you.
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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Within the United States Virgin Islands (USVI), students with learning disabilities (SWLDs) face many challenges in obtaining a high school diploma. Often, SWLDs have a more difficult time than their nondisabled peers in completing high school graduation requirements. Within the USVI, there is limited research concerning dropout rates of SWLDs on St. Croix (STX).

The USVI territory is divided into two districts, St. Thomas/St. John (STT/STJ) and St. Croix (STX). STX was the focus of this study. The dropout rate of students with disabilities in the USVI is significantly higher than that of high schools in the mainland (U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Education, 2015). Since the 2014–2015 fiscal year, State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR) Indicator reported that 15% of SWDLs drop out of high school in the STX district while in the STT/STJ district 5.12% SWDLs were recorded as high school dropouts. This is significant because the STT/STJ district reports indicated that 66% of all USVI SWLDs who drop out attend the STX school district.

According to SPP/APR (2015) report, the dropout rate among SWLDs in the USVI continues to rise despite the execution of intervention programs aimed to reduce the number of dropouts. Students with disabilities battle innumerable challenges that prevent them from making the transition from the ninth to the 12th grade and from obtaining a high school diploma. The expectation of SWLDs is that they will graduate from high school with the academic and social skills they need to be successful adults in the community.

Dropping out of high school is a choice that severely impacts a student's chances for subsequent educational and occupational opportunities (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Misjudgment, misunderstanding, and a lack of guidance often lead SWLDs to the decision to drop out. Transitioning to high school is one of the most critical stages during an SWLD's academic career (Kennedy, 2017). American high schools are not immune to the dropout crisis; however, when reviewing the national dropout rate, it was evident that the dropout rate of SWLDs is approximately twice that of general education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Those SWLDs who have not completed graduation requirements have limited potential for securing a stable future. In addition, SWLDs who drop out (a) have higher rates of unemployment and incarceration, (b) are more likely to have poor health, and (c) tend to rely on government assistance (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Dropping out is the result of a long process of disengagement and alienation, preceded by less severe types of withdrawal such as truancy and course failures (Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017). Those SWLDs who fail to complete high school could face serious implications regarding social stability and economic growth (Nworie, 2016). Each year the State Office of the Special Education Programs reports on the increase of dropout SWLDs. The social implications of high dropout rates of SWLDs may include lower paying jobs (Kennedy, 2017), failed marriages (Gottfried, 2014), and potential incarcerations (Gutman, 2017). While the aforementioned were clearly defined outcomes of when an SWLD drops out of high school identified in the literature review, there were several reasons identified as preemptive of a student's decision to drop out. These reasons were: (a) lack of connection to the school environment, (b) a perception

that school is boring, (c) feeling unmotivated, (d) academic challenges, and (e) the weight of real-world events (Dupéré et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

Students with learning disabilities often have a more difficult time than their nondisabled peers in completing high school graduation requirements. Lawson and Shields (2014) reviewed dropout rates concerning SWLDs in the United States and found that an average of 65% fail to complete their schooling. In comparison to the aforementioned national SWLD dropout rate, the overall USVI SWLD dropout rate of 17.1% (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2016) does not appear significant. When considering the STX alone has 66% of the USVI total SWLD dropouts, the need to better understand this problem seems evident. Furthermore, within the USVI there was limited research concerning dropout rates of SWLD in STX.

The STX district was the focus of this study. As stated, the dropout rate of students with disabilities in the USVI is significantly higher than that of high schools on the mainland (U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Education, 2015). In the fiscal year of 2014–2015, the SPP/APR 2015 report, Indicator 2 denoted 15% of SWLDs dropout of high school in the STX district compared to that of the STT/STJ district in which only 5.12% SWLDs dropout. This was significant because the STT/STJ district reports indicated that 66% of all USVI SWLDs who dropout attends the STX school district. Furthermore, National Center of Education Statistics (2016) stated about 25% of all incoming freshmen fail to graduate from high school on time. In addition, the United States currently ranks 22 out of 27 developed countries in high school completers. As a

result, the dropout rate decreased by 4.7% from 1990 to 2010 (12.1% to 7.4%; National Center of Education Statistics, 2016).

Accountability mandates from the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004) require schools to improve graduation rates. The initiative mandated that all schools immediately respond to the dropout crisis by implementing effective dropout prevention practices through their district school improvement plan to steadily graduate more students while preparing them to be college and career ready.

Maslow (1943) stated that people are not motivated by rewards or desires, but rather by having their basic needs met. Further, Maslow purported that if these needs were not being fulfilled in homes, then they could be fulfilled in schools where a positive school culture is apparent. In this case, SWLDs need to feel there is value in their education and in achieving a high school diploma. Maslow's theory offers a framework for assessing factors that contribute with dropout SWLDs. Maslow suggested that human needs can be arranged in a five-level hierarchy or hierarchy of needs. Each level, according to Maslow, reports the value of people and their unique needs. Once this theory is applied to SWLDs in the school setting, each level of needs becomes an important provision to keeping high school SWLDs from dropping out.

Nature of the Study

To examine SWLD rising dropout rates in STX, I used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of SWLDs who attended a public high school on USVI STX, but who dropped out before obtaining a high school diploma. According to Wilson,

Onwuegbuzie, and Manning (2016), a qualitative research design provides an opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of participants experiencing a common experience. For this study, I used a qualitative case study approach to examine the experiences and beliefs for SWLDs, primarily using semi structured in-depth interviews. I conducted a case study to gain an understanding of how SWLDs viewed their high school experiences and what factors impacted their decision to drop out of high school. I used the qualitative method to study the participants in the context of their educational environment, which was the most advantageous to the STX district.

Research Questions

The guiding research question for this study was: What specific experiences influenced the SWLD's decision to drop out of a high school on STX within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs? I also asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). What elements of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs do

SWLDs identify as contributing to dropping out of high school?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). What missing elements within the Maslow's

hierarchy of needs, if put in place, might have prevented dropping out

from high school?

A more detailed explanation on the guiding research questions and research methodology is included in Chapter 3.

Purpose Statement

With dropout rates of SWLDs on USVI STX accounting for 66% of the total USVI SWLD dropout rate, the purpose of this project study was to examine what factors USVI STX SWLDs identified as influencing their decision to drop out of high school.

According to Arteaga (2015), indicators of potential SWLD dropouts include: (a) behavioral infractions, (b) low performance or academic failure, (c) increased absenteeism, (d) poor retention, (e) socioeconomic background, and (f) low self-worth. I sought to provide information regarding what high school dropout SWLDs view as essential to have prevented them from dropping out. In addition, the findings of this study can provide pertinent data for teachers, educational stakeholders, and community leaders that could be utilized to assist efforts aimed to decrease dropout rates of SWLDs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and the school experiences of SWLDs.

Maslow suggested that only when students' needs are met (such as belonging and safety) can they exhibit improvement in academic success. Further, Maslow stated that if these needs are not being fulfilled in homes, then they can be fulfilled in schools where a positive school culture is apparent. Thus, high school can serve as a safety net, and school personnel can serve as protectors. For SWLDs who seek belongingness, support, and the safety net of security while attending school, misjudgment, misunderstanding, and a lack of guidance often lead SWLDs to the decision to drop out (Amdouni, Paredes, Kribs, & Mubayi, 2017). Maslow identified that man is not motivated by rewards or desires, but rather by situations in which basic needs are met. In this case, SWLDs need to feel there is value in their education and in achieving a high school diploma. The conceptual framework of Maslow's theory was appropriate for this study because it aligned the participant responses relative to SWLD decisions to dropout without obtaining a high school diploma.

Maslow's (1943) theory (Figure 1) offers a framework for examining factors that contribute to dropout SWLDs. Maslow suggested that human needs can be arranged in a five-level hierarchy or hierarchy of needs. The higher needs emerge only after lower level needs have been attained. The first level of the hierarchy contains the physiological needs (age, hunger, sex, food, rest, and thirst). The need for safety and security (protection, stability, freedom from fear and chaos), reside on the second level. The need for love and belonging which is the third level (intimacy, attention and affiliation with group). The fourth level of the hierarchy is the self-esteem needs (feeling of accomplishment). On the highest level of the hierarchy is the self-actualization needs (achieving the highest personal potential and fulfillment). Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, individual needs can be characterized by considering the value of people and their unique needs. Once the schools applied this theory to SWLDs in the school setting, each level of need became an important provision to keeping high school SWLD from dropping out.

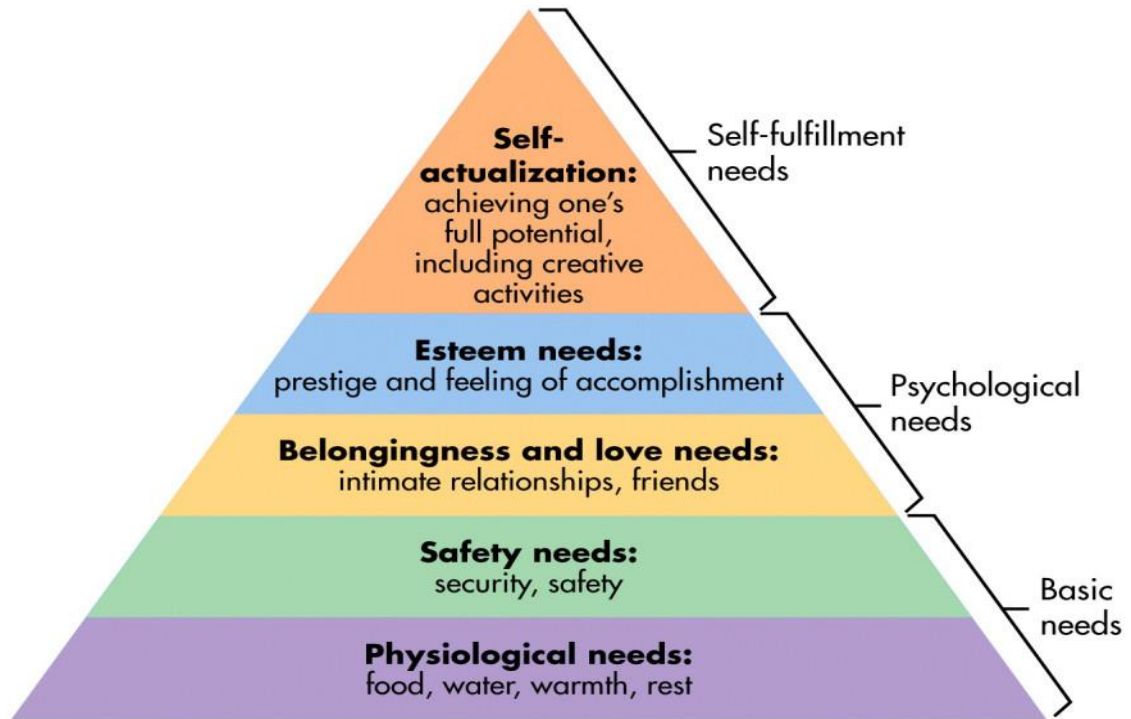


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. From "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," by Saul McLeod, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>. Adapted with permission.

Definition of Terms

Terms used throughout this study were defined as follows:

Adequate yearly progress (AYP): A measurement that determines how every public school and school district in the country (including U.S. territories) is performing academically according to results on standardized tests in accordance to benchmarks set by NCLB (P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. §6301 et seq.).

Drop out: For research purposes, a student who fails to earn high school graduation at all (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). The Virgin Islands Department of Education (2015) defined public secondary school dropouts as the percentage of children enrolled in public schools in seventh to 12th grades inclusively

who did not (a) report for class at the beginning of the school year, (b) graduate, or (c) meet the exclusionary conditions of transfer to another school, suspension, illness, or death in the new school year.

Graduation: As mandated in the Virgin Islands Code Title 17 Section 61, in order for an exceptional student attending classes under special education to receive a high school diploma, the student shall meet the same graduation requirements (26 credits) in effects for nondisabled students at the time of graduation.

Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). The 1990 amendment to P.L. 94-142. IDEA federally mandated zero reject, free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, due process, and technology-related assistance (P.L.108 446, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq.).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Federal legislation that mandated schools school districts and states demonstrate proficiency in the education students. The NCLB also mandated that educators be highly qualified and certified in their content area and be provided with professional development and training to acquire proficiency (P.L.107-110, 20 U.S.C. §6301 et seq.).

Special education. Instruction designed to meet the special learning needs of students with disabilities or gifts and talents. Some of these students have difficulty learning in a regular classroom; therefore, they need special education to function in school. Others generally do well in regular classrooms, but they need special education to help them master certain skills to reach their full potential (Hunt & Marshall, 2013).

Students with learning disability (SWLD). A person with normal to above-normal intelligence or ability who is not achieving at his or her potential. Usually, this poor

achievement is demonstrated in only one or two specific areas. The specific areas typically affected are reading, written language, math, reasoning, and organizational skills. For students identified as having a learning disability (LD), poor achievement cannot be attributed to some other type of disability, such as a vision or hearing problem, nor can it be attributed to a language problem or a behavioral or physical problem (Hunt & Marshall, 2013).

Assumptions

I selected a case study due to the nature of this study, which involved an in-depth examination within a real-life phenomenon. I chose a qualitative design as a means to eliminate possible assumptions that could be made about participant experiences. I assumed that exploring the factors that influence an STX USVI high school SWLD's decision to drop out provided valuable insight to the research questions and identified common experiences that lead these students to drop out. I also assumed the participants who dropped out would be open and honest about sharing their experiences.

Limitations

I conducted this study using a purposeful sample of individuals with learning disabilities, ages 18 years and older, who dropped out of school and were unable to obtain a high school diploma. I created flyers requesting volunteer participants and were distributed or posted at community centers, libraries, or public service announcements via radio or social media. As the culture of the USVI is different than on the mainland of the United States, it was easier to place posters in key work sites and adult training education sites to recruit participants. I relied on recollection of the participants' experiences relative to dropping out of high school.

Delimitations

I intentionally delimited the study to the district of St. Croix, USVI. Second, I confined the study to the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities who dropout before obtaining a high school diploma. Furthermore, because I used a qualitative research approach, generalization of the findings was possible. My goal for this study was to derive meaning; therefore, my expectation was to identify the common perceptions and school experiences among SWLDs.

Significance of the Study

Those SWLDs who drop out of high school exhibit (a) a higher incidence of dropping out of the workforce, (b) lower rates of marriages, (c) increased incidence of divorce and births outside marriage, (d) increased involvement in the legal and welfare system, and (e) poor health (Dupéré et al., 2017). A greater percentage of persons with a learning disability reside in government subsidized housing, receive social assistance, and do not hold a high school diploma or graduation equivalent (Badulescu & Csintalan, 2016). Wieringo (2015) reported that SWLDs voiced dissatisfaction and negative experiences with school teachers, principals, and school security officers.

The outcomes of this study provided pertinent information relative to decreasing SWLDs' decision to drop out in the district of STX. According to Maslow (1943), people are not motivated by rewards or desires, but instead by situations in which basic needs are met. Using his theory of the hierarchy of needs, Maslow categorized these unmet needs in the lowest level of deficiency. Only when the lower level is satisfied can an individual meet higher-level growth needs. Maslow's theory was applied to SWLDs in the school setting, where each level of need became an important provision to keeping high school

SWLDs from dropping out. Many SWLDs need to feel there is worth in their education and obtaining a high school diploma. Additionally, information that I gathered in this study provided key elements noted as relative to SWLDs' high school experiences, ultimately providing a platform for social change.

Summary

In this study, I examined the high school experiences of SWLDs who chose to dropout before obtaining a high school diploma. In the fiscal year of 2014–2015, the SPP/APR 2015 report revealed Indicator 2 showing 15% of SWLDs dropout of high school in the STX district whereas only 5.12% SWLDs dropout in the STT/STJ district. Therefore, 66% of all USVI SWLDs who drop out attended the STX school district. The data from this qualitative study could be of value to teachers and administrators by assisting them in improving awareness of those factors identified by SWLDs in the completion of a high school diploma. The intended outcome of this research was to provide stakeholders and policy makers with factors identified by SWLD dropouts as contributing to their decision to drop out.

Chapter 1 included an introduction of the current research relative to mainland and USVI SWLDs dropouts, as well as the research limitations, assumptions, and delimitations. Chapter 2 consists of a literature review regarding current research relating to dropout SWLDs and the factors affecting their decision to obtain a high school diploma. Chapter 3 includes details of methodology that I used in this study. In Chapter 4, I present data collection from interviews, interpretation of results, and the quality of evidence of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a summary of findings and recommendations for implementation as well as areas for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

My intent for this literature review was to synthesize the vast array of current literature examining dropout rates of SWLDs. Chapter 2 also includes a brief overview on the dropout epidemic and the history of IDEA (2004) as it pertains to Indicator 1, *improving graduation rates for students with disabilities*, Indicator 2, *decreasing dropout rates for students with disabilities*, Indicator 13, *the development of transition planning*, and Indicator 14, *improving the outcomes for students moving from secondary to postsecondary activities*.

Next, I discuss the characteristics and causes of SWLDs who dropout, as well as the outcomes of SWLDs who likewise dropout of high school. In this section I review additional studies of recommendations to address high school dropout. I also briefly outline of the methodology I used in this study.

Maslow's (1943) theory offers a hierarchy for examining factors that contribute to dropout SWLDs. Maslow suggested that human needs can be arranged in a five-level hierarchy or hierarchy of needs. I applied Maslow's theory to SWLDs in the school setting. Each level of need became an important provision to preventing high school SWLDs from dropping out. Lastly, I summarize and establish the foundation of this research.

I used the following resources to conduct this literature review: (a) Walden University online databases such as ERIC, EBSCO, and ProQuest, (b) book and journals in the Walden University research library. The keywords that I used included: *dropout rates of SWLDs*, *IDEA and special education indicators*, *USVI high school SWLDs*

dropout rates, and *graduation rates*. I use statistics from Child Find (2016) and the USVI Department of Education (2015) SPP/APR Report in this review to provide a brief overview on the dropout epidemic in the Virgin Islands.

Dropout Epidemic: Why Students with Learning Disability Leave

The high dropout rate impacts high schools across the United States. According to Dupéré et al. (2017), the dropout epidemic is the most significant challenge affecting young adults who are low-income, minority, urban, single-parent children attending large public high schools. Understanding why students drop out of school is the key to addressing this educational epidemic. There is no single cause or reason on why students drop out of high school; nevertheless, Dupéré et al. (2017) reported different reasons why students drop out of high school, including (a) the lack of connection to the school environment, (b) a perception that school is boring, (c) feeling unmotivated, (d) academic challenges, and (e) the weight of real world events.

The shift from middle school to high school is the most critical stage during a student's academic experience (Iachini, Rogelberg, Terry, & Lutz, 2016). Iachini, Rogelberg, Terry, and Lutz (2016) noted students who get off-track by failing courses early in high school are far less likely to graduate. McKee and Caldarella (2016) stated that by ninth grade, students who continued to be academically challenged had a 75% probability of leaving school prematurely. Gottfried (2014) and Marchbanks et al. (2015) reported that the ninth-grade year is the most crucial grade level in the area of dropout prevention.

Moreover, the changeover from a middle school to a high school threatens to be the most difficult transition due to the change in social expectations as students begin to

develop and mature. In fact, the new challenges that rising eighth-grade students encounter with unpredicted fears and concerns as they transition to ninth grade places them at risk for the simple reason that they exhibit lower academic performance, grade retention, decreased school attendance and premature school departure. Gottfried (2014) also noted that a multitude of factors contribute to a ninth-grade dropout rate that surpasses dropout rates of other grades.

Fried et al. (2016) conducted a study in Massachusetts to examine whether attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was an independent contributor to grade retention when adjusting for IQ, learning disorders, and social class. They concluded that among participants with ADHD, social class and IQ were significant predictors of high school dropout or repeated grade. Fried et al. (2016) noted an interaction effect where girls with ADHD had a higher risk ratio for repeated grade/dropout when compared with boys with ADHD. Fried et al. found that participants with ADHD were significantly more likely to repeat a grade, adjusting for all other variables indicating the critical importance of early identification of ADHD to help mitigate adverse educational outcomes.

Previous researchers examined high school dropout rate patterns and found a correlation to reasons for student drop out. Kennedy (2017) studied the correlation of dropout patterns and identified three factors that predict potential dropouts. Kennedy found the first pattern displayed was poor academic performance as evidenced by low grades and test scores, failing core courses, or not earning promotion. A second pattern that Kennedy noted was the lack of engagement with emphasis on truancy, disciplinary actions, and disengagement with their peers and teachers. The third pattern was the

transition phase where difficulty of transitioning was present either between elementary and middle school, or between middle and high school, or both. Consequently, Johnson, Wallis, Opreescu, and Gray (2017) and Kennedy (2017) believed that the most important time to predict the completion of obtaining a 12th grade diploma was between middle and high school. However, dropping out manifests itself well before high school starts (Dupéré et al., 2015).

According to the Virgin Islands Department of Education (2015) a student who departs from school prior to achieving a high school credential is classified as a *dropout*. The decision by an SWLD to drop out creates a multitude of repercussions for the student personally and socially in the community (Dupéré et al., 2017). Cox, Hernández-Gantes, and Fletcher (2015) identified the extent to which high school SWLDs participated in dropout prevention programs was a factor in their high school completion. The researchers found that participation in hands-on intervention programs facilitated significantly higher rates of high school completion than direct instruction. Many SWLDs drop out of high school due to disengagement and withdrawal; however, subsequently, SWLDs do want to graduate (Jepsen, Mueser, & Troske, 2017). According to Jepsen, Mueser, and Troske (2017), SWLDs view education as an empty activity and have little to no understanding of high school diploma requirements or how to meet those requirements.

Furthermore, Howe and Miramontes (2015) saw education as a failing system for SWLDs. These researchers commented that SWLDs have been stigmatized and labeled as problematic students and as such have been alienated and isolated in schools (Howe & Miramontes, 2015). As a result, school dropouts have a higher percentage of

encountering problems with the justice system and lower percentage of getting back on the educational path (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Rud, van Klaveren, Groot, and van den Brink (2016) suggested that individuals with disabilities have personality and cognitive deficits that predispose them to criminal or delinquent behavior. These characteristics include low impulse control, cantankerous behavior, vulnerability, failure to anticipate consequences, and poor perceptions of social cues (Anderson, 2014).

History of NCLB and Views of IDEA

Due to accountability mandates of the NCLB Act of 2001, schools across the United States have faced federal and state scrutiny (Holbein & Ladd, 2017). The NCLB (2001) mandated that “every child would have a fair and equal opportunity to receive a high-quality education and reach minimal academic achievement and proficiencies on rigorous state standard assessment” (Section 1001, p. 107–110). The NCLB was a breakthrough in education reform. The U.S. Department of Education touted the legislation as the “most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act since its enactment in 1965” that “refines the federal role in K–12 education” (Pasternak, 2003, p. 17). In addition to these claims, NCLB champions accountability for “all students, including student groups based on poverty, race and ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency” (p. 18). The NCLB was created to increase student performance by setting measurable goals and using assessment to determine whether or not the goals were met.

Additional legislation has direct correlation to NCLB phenomenon. With the passage of the NCLB, high schools, districts, and states became accountable for measuring and reporting their graduation rates. The NCLB promised meaningful benefits

to all students through a high level of accountability. In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), known as Public Law 94-142; it was America's special education law that not only focused on the need to educate children with disabilities, but also mandated states to provide for the educational needs of children with disabilities in the same manner they do for children without disabilities (Zirkel, 2015). In 1997 PL94-142 was amended and later became the foundation of the IDEA.

The IDEA was intended to be a foundation from which SWDs receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). According to the National Center on Educational Outcomes (2003), the main difference between IDEA and NCLB is that IDEA specifically governs services provided to SWLDs that are unique to each SWD, thus the academic needs of SWDs can be met. The National Center on Education Outcomes asserted that the NCLB complements the IDEA provisions by providing public accountability at the school, district, and state levels for all students with disabilities. NCLB builds on IDEA law by requiring the participation of students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments (Turnbull III, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Park, 2003).

Although the type and level of services are different according to the need, every student identified with a learning disability is provided an individualized education program (IEP) team that determines each student's services and transition needs. This process guarantees that students with disabilities are given fair and adequate access to education before turning 22 years of age (IDEA, 2004). Despite protections established

under the IDEA, as well as numerous drop-out prevention initiatives, many SWLDs have higher dropout rates than students without disabilities (Love, 2017).

For the past 2 decades, literature examining dropout rate of SWLDs focused primarily on the IEP transition requirements of the IDEA, which mandated special education students receive transition planning and training at the age of 16. Love (2017) purported that when transition planning occurs in the senior year of high school, it is ineffective in assisting SWLDs in meeting graduation requirements and is one factor that contributes to an SWLD choosing to drop out. The academic obligations SWLDs have in their senior year are overwhelming. Despite the 2004 amendments to the IDEA mandating transition planning based on student strengths using a results-oriented process, at the age of 16 it is easier for an SWLD to dropout. Indicator 13 mandated (IDEA, 2004) that the

.... percent of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that are annually updated and based upon an age appropriate transition assessment, transition services, including courses of study, that will reasonably enable the student to meet those postsecondary goals, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition service's needs. (p. 118)

This stipulated that transition planning requires a structural balance between keeping the student on course to a reasonable goal and reality with encouraging the student to embrace their dreams. If this is altered in anyway, a student may become discouraged and overwhelmed and later drop out (Love, 2017).

Causes of High School Dropouts

The literature on the high dropout rate of special education students' builds on the findings in the literature relative to the dropout rate in schools generally. According to Dupéré et al. (2015), dropout policies and trends for SWLDs illustrate that academic failure in the early years is one of the primary factors that lead to SWLDs dropping out of school. In fact, scholars Krstić, Lazarević, and Ilić (2016) agreed with Dupéré et al.'s finding that suggested preventing students from dropping out should begin as early as students show signs of withdrawal and disengagement from school, which may be observed in the first years of schooling.

Dropping out of high school is a statewide epidemic for both general education students and students with disabilities. There are many challenges that prompt SWLDs to leave school without graduating (DePaoli, et al., 2015). Research showed that demographics do matter, yet the reality of a school environment is also a factor that determines the reasons why students stay in school (Anderson & Walker, 2015). Recent evidence from Harris (2016) suggested students are not only impacted by personal obstacles, but also by influences beyond school, and are almost twice as likely as students without disabilities to obtain a diploma. Harris also added that the dropout occurrence is stereotypically associated with underachievement, boredom, disengagement and poor performance, lack of parental involvement, as well as seeking and maintaining employment. Whereas researchers Eicher, Staerklé, and Clémence (2014) found that by examining the longitudinally perceived stress and optimism as predictors of dropout intentions over a period of 4 years, they could distinguish between stable and temporary predictors of dropout intentions.

Dropping out of school is a process. In fact, it is long process that is manifested in the early years of school (Dupéré et al., 2015). While there is no single reason why SWLDs dropout of school, most dropouts exhibit one or more of the following issues: truancy, discipline, suspension or expulsion, lack of academic achievement, and real-life events as a chaotic or dysfunctional home life. Some SWLDs lag behind their nondisabled peers when it comes to completing high school. The dropout rate from general education has remained moderately stable (Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2017). In the 2015 Building a Grad Nation Report released by the America's Promise Alliance, it was stated that the United States is on track to reach 90% graduation rates by 2020 and the population of SWLDs was predicted to graduate at 61.9% (DePaoli et al., 2015). To meet this goal, dropout prevention was crucial and needed to be identified when signs were noticed in the early stages of school.

More and more incidences of school violence occurred, a phenomenon that influenced students to withdraw from school (Shukla, Konold, & Cornell, 2016). Researchers Jia, Konold, and Cornell (2016) noted safety as a factor in students dropping out. Bullying was another factor that students cited as a reason for withdrawal from school (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013). Cornell, Gregory, Huang, and Fan (2013) provided evidence that the prevalence of peer victimization in high school was an important factor in high school academic performance. Baldry, Farrington, and Sorrentino's (2017) conducted research that demonstrated that not only boys were being physically bullied, but girls were disturbingly cyberbullied.

Failure to complete and obtain a high school diploma varied based on different reasons. Ripamonti and Barberis (2017) studied the geographical level on the relation

between cultural capital and high school dropout. They indicated that living in an environment with animated cultural life might enhance students' non-cognitive skills, thus fostering their involvement in formative activities and the development of their human capital (Ripamonti & Barberis, 2017). Sahakian and Morein-Zamir (2015) conducted a study that examined dropout rates with a focus on students identified as having ADHD. Data collected from psychiatric interviews, socioeconomic status measures, and IQ testing indicated that 28% of SWLDs repeated a grade during their high school education. The researchers concluded that IQ was a significant factor relative to students who drop out of high school. On the contrary, Freeman and Simonsen (2015) concluded there is a similarity between the connections of academic outcomes in the students' freshman year. The researchers noted that while 57% of students with specific learning disabilities and 59% of those with other health impairments graduate, the rates are only 37% for students with mild intellectual disabilities and 35% for those with behavioral or emotional disabilities. Freeman and Simonsen noted that these results correlated to the demographic percentages of SWLDs who drop out of high school.

Another factor was race, including African Americans, Hispanic, and Hispanic English language learner (ELL) students. Kim, Chang, Singh, and Allen (2015) studied patterns and factors that examined the dropout trajectories of racial and linguistic minority students and explored the effects of students' contextual factors on their high school dropout risks. Kim et al. believed this population had comparatively high dropout rates and was motivated to explore factors for promoting high school completion. Kim et al. noted that the results were devastatingly upsetting; specifically, the higher dropout rates in African Americans than Hispanics. Sadly, enough, Brekke (2014) found that

students who did not obtain a high school diploma had a lower probability of being employed than those who achieved a high school diploma. Yet researchers found students who emigrate to the US have a higher likelihood of employment than African Americans who live in the US (Brekke, 2014; Hermanson, 2016; Itzhaki, Itzhaky, & Yablon, 2018).

Truancy was the most prevalent risk factor in determining high school failure in the early school years. Absences were monitored as early as kindergarten and were deemed a predictive factor for later years all the way up to the first few weeks of a student's freshman year in high school (Sahin, Arseven, & Kiliç, 2016). Keeping track of attendance determines whether or not students will eventually graduate. With all things considered, SWLDs had higher rates of absenteeism during the early and middle years of high school when compared to their nondisabled peers (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Cabus and De Witte (2016) learned SWLDs not attending class instruction, in all likelihood, under-performed and experienced anxiety that stemmed from their assumed lack of ability, which eventually led to the decision to drop out of school. This was unmistakably evident as SWLDs faced a higher likelihood of failure in their later years in high school (Hynes, 2014).

Another prevalent risk factor was school engagement. Disengagement is displayed by increased rates of behavioral infractions, low performance, or failure of academics. Absenteeism and retention issues were significant predictive risk factors of dropping out of school (Krstić, Lazarević, & Ilić, 2016). Many SWLDs lack the connection between school engagement and completion. In addition, Cabus and De Witte (2016) suggested that a student's school engagement is directly impacted by the nature of the relationships he or she has with the school adults.

Researchers studied risk factors that predict the probability of a SWLDs dropping out of high school based on the lack of family involvement (McConnell & Kubina, (2014). Alternatively, low education of parental figures, family dynamics, generational poverty, lack of parent involvement in education, divorce, parental death, and a history of household dropouts were among early indicators of dropout in the family domain (Hynes, 2014; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Schargel and Smink (2014) noted high mobility, low educational expectations, and permissive parenting as associated with an increased risk of dropping out. Parr and Bonitz (2015) concurred that poor community and familial influences often translate to poor school performance. Moreover, Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014) observed that students with involved parents tended to display higher achievement, exhibit lower dropout rates, and adjust to changes involved in the transition to high school. Therefore, parent characteristics such as providing academic and motivational support for learning (Parr & Bonitz, 2015), monitoring their children's activities (McConnell & Kubina, 2014), and holding high but realistic expectations for school completion were associated with students attaining a high school diploma (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014).

Hovdhaugen (2015) examined why SWLDs leave school without a diploma and how this impacts more than their own personal pursuits. According to Southward and Kyzar (2017), SWLDs drop out because they want to earn money for daily living expenses, such as financing a car, paying for auto insurance, buying clothes or electronics, paying for housing, or supporting unhealthy addictions. Dropouts who were concerned about their immediate, short-term financial situation saw a full-time job as the best way to maintain the lifestyle they desire. Unfortunately, the economic and societal

consequences resonate across society. Southward and Kyzar described how loss of tax revenue, higher spending on public assistance, and higher crime rates of disabled dropouts puts significant financial strain on society, as funds earmarked for domestic programs are used by those who drop out. Ultimately, SWLDs who dropped out of high school were simply not as prepared as their peers to face the challenging demands of today's workforce.

Negative Outcomes for SWLDs Who Dropout

High dropout rates pose a problem not only for school systems, but for the communities in which dropouts live. According to Southward and Kyzar (2017), dropouts not only experience negative consequences leading up to dropping out of school but the effects of dropping out also follow them throughout the rest of their lives. Rud et al. (2016) emphasized that students with learning disabilities who drop out were more likely to be arrested, change jobs often, and start families earlier than their nondisabled peers. Subsequently enough, Doren, Murray, and Gau (2014) found more than 80% of individuals incarcerated are high school dropouts.

Nevertheless, individuals with learning disabilities outnumber those without disabilities by 3 to 1 in our jails (Sinclair, Unruh, Griller-Clark, & Waintrup, 2017). In fact, Anderson (2014) reported that taxpayers spend approximately \$51,000 per year to incarcerate one person, while it costs close to \$11,000—significantly less—to educate an SWLD. By way of contrast, the cost effectiveness of a high school education is extremely obvious. Unfortunately, we cannot determine the value of a diploma with dollars. The impact of leaving school without obtaining a diploma leads to crucial personal outcomes

for students with disabilities and moreover will continue to face additional barriers throughout their lifetimes (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Poverty has long been recognized as a major factor in a student's decision to discontinue education (Clark, 2015). Poverty adversely impacts virtually every aspect of a child's life and the stress of poverty makes it difficult for a child to be successful in school (Ellison & Woods, 2016). In the context of Maslow's (1943) theory, students living in impoverished households who do not have their basic needs met cannot focus on school because their concentration is given to securing the daily needs of life. Furthermore, the students lack the necessities and emotional support in becoming successful in school.

Recent research identified that SWLDs were more likely to be financially dependent on the government system, change jobs often, or start unwanted families (Harris, 2016). Regardless, when SWLDs enter the work force, their outcomes are not favorable. Regrettably, unpreparedness of the SWLD usually results in falling behind their nondisabled peers and unfortunately the economy is negatively impacted by their productivity (Eastman, 2016). Additionally, Southward and Kyzar (2017) foresaw the societal costs such as loss of tax revenue, higher spending on public assistance, and higher crime rates of dropout individuals with disabilities puts significant financial strain on society, as funds allocated for domestic programs are used by those who dropout. Under these circumstances ongoing research is needed to identify the impact of school experiences on graduation outcomes.

Subsequently, researchers Barrat et al. (2014) noted that it is incumbent upon schools, districts, and states to address the special education high school dropout.

Documentation noted the costs associated with dropping out. Eastman (2016) found that on average SWLDs who drop out were more likely than others to experience negative adult-life outcomes. In a recent survey, high school dropouts were 72% more likely to be unemployed as compared to high-school graduates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) concluded that the average annual income of an employed high school dropout in 2015 was \$19,200 compared to \$28,600 for a high school graduate, which was a difference of \$9,400.

Indeed, for SWLDs, completing graduation requirements increases the odds the individual will have an opportunity to secure meaningful employment leading to economic self-sufficiency and independence (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Positive opportunities for personal and social development and growth diminish when adolescents drop out of high school. Dropping out also increases the future likelihood of continued dependence on family members for financial and social support. Another outcome for dropping out is the likelihood to experience poor levels of health (Eastman, 2016). Further, dropouts comprise 82% of the prison population and 85% of juvenile justice cases (Rud et al., 2016). Additionally, being a dropout brings social and economic costs, which include dependency on social welfare and benefit programs, economic dependency on families, and limited voting and civic participation (Doren et al., 2014).

Anderson (2014) purported that high school dropouts commit crimes at a higher rate than high school graduates. Additionally, Anderson's study concluded that 82% of the prison population and 85% of juvenile justice cases were adolescents and adults who dropped out of school. Unfortunately, a high percentage of these individuals were also individuals with disabilities (Hynes, 2014). Rud et al. (2016) purported several theories

that emerged to examine the overrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in the correctional system. One theory focused on school failure and emphasized that learning, emotional/behavioral, and intellectual disabilities lead directly to both school failure or transitionally to school problems and failure, triggering an undesirably negative self-image, which leads to school dropout, suspension, and crime (Anderson, 2014; Rud et al., 2016).

Maslow's (1943) theory offered an unfathomable framework for examining factors that contribute to the dropout rate of SWLDs. The theorist suggested that human needs can be arranged in a five-level hierarchy or hierarchy of needs. The higher needs emerge only after lower level needs have been attained. The first level, of the hierarchy, contains the physiological needs (age, hunger, sex, food, rest, and thirst). The need for safety and security (protection, stability, freedom from fear and chaos), reside on the second level. The need for love and belonging which is the third level (intimacy, attention and affiliation with group). The fourth level of the hierarchy is the self-esteem needs (feeling of accomplishment). On the highest level of the hierarchy is the self-actualization needs (achieving the highest personal potential and fulfillment). Each level, according to Maslow's theory, reports the value of people and their unique needs.

Failure to complete high school is associated with a myriad of negative outcomes that relate to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs components (Visser, 2017).

Researchers Carsley, Heath, Gomez-Garibello, and Mills (2017) examined the role of mindfulness and anxiety in adolescents' intentions for dropping out of school. Through their research, student anxiety demonstrated a moderate significant negative association with mindfulness, and a low significant positive association with reports of dropout

intention (Carsley, Heath, Gomez-Garibello, & Mills, 2017). Using the fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy (self-esteem), Carsley et al. (2017) noted that mindfulness was found to partially mediate the relationship between anxiety and dropout intention with a medium effect.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of high school SWLD dropouts residing in STX to better understand contributing factors resulting in the decision to drop out. I used Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a framework to examine factors that contribute to dropout SWLDs. Maslow suggested that human needs can be arranged in a five-level hierarchy or hierarchy of needs.

Dropout rates of SWLDs are significantly higher in the U.S. Virgin Islands when compared to dropout rates on the mainland (Jia, Konold, & Cornell, 2016). The outcomes of this study could add to the current literature concerning SWLDs dropouts as dropping out of school severely impacts students' chances for subsequent educational and occupational opportunities (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Further, high school dropouts experience lower paying jobs (Kennedy, 2017), failed marriages (Gottfried, 2014), and potential incarcerations (Gutman, 2017).

In Chapter 1, I gave an introduction that focused on the research problem, background, the research questions that guided the study, and the conceptual framework of the research problem. I also discussed relevant terminology, as well as the scope and limitations of the study. In Chapter 2, I provided a literature review regarding current research relating to dropout SWLDs and the factors affecting their decision to obtain a high school diploma. In Chapter 3, I present the methodology rationale for selecting a qualitative case study. This chapter also includes methodological components of the target population, data collection and analysis procedures, internal and external validity issues, and ethical concerns specific to the inclusion of human participants in the study.

In this case study, I used in-depth interviews to attain optimal information from participants to understand the problem of higher than national dropout rates within the local setting of STX, USVI.

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative case study is an effective approach for gathering data from participants, as it allows for participants to share personal experiences (Hatch, 2002) pertaining to dropping out of high school. According to Creswell (2009), a case study is defined “as one that describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived-experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 13). In this qualitative research, the case study format enabled me to examine the commonalities among participants who share the experience of dropping out of high school. Further, to guide the examination of participants’ drop out experience, Maslow’s (1943) theory of hierarchical needs guided the research questions and data coding. In this study, I utilized a case study approach to examine the experiences and beliefs of SWLDs utilizing semistructured interviews.

Creswell (2013) purported that undertaking a case study approach requires the researcher to determine the broadest essential research question to gain reliable insight into participants’ experiences. In this study, I focused on the educational experiences of 12 to 15 volunteers who were individuals with a learning disability, and who had dropped out of high school in the district of STX prior to obtaining a high school diploma. I implemented an interview protocol to safeguard participants’ confidentiality and the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2007; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). In this qualitative research, I utilized a case study approach to gain an understanding of how

SWLDs describe high school experiences and factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out.

Qualitative Research Tradition

This qualitative case study provided an opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of participants experiences pertaining to dropping out of high school (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, & Manning, 2016). I chose to use the qualitative research method as a means to eliminate possible assumptions that can be made about the participants' experiences and examine factors relative to SWLD participants' drop out experiences in an authentic way. Qualitative research allows for a rich, authentic review of perceptual information (Staller, 2010). Hence, using a qualitative case study approach was an appropriate research method for this investigation of a specific life event—dropping out of high school—and how participants interpreted their experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

I collected data from SWLDs who had dropped out of STX high school with a goal of attempting to develop a composite description of the essence of the participants' experiences (Van Manen, 1990). I collected data using questions that pertained to participants within the context and reported situation(s) that influenced or affected the individuals' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research is designed to explain, interpret, explore, or describe (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Therefore, I conducted data collection through in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data using probing and guiding open-ended interview questions.

Research Questions

The intent of this case study was to examine the high dropout rate among SWLDs on STX. The guiding research question was: What specific experiences influenced the

SWLD's decision to drop out of a high school on STX within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs? I also asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). What elements of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs do SWLDs identify as contributing to dropping out of high school?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). What missing elements within the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if put in place, might have prevented dropping out from high school?

Population and Sample

Participants for this study were individuals with learning disabilities who attended STX school system and chose to drop out. I interviewed 12 participants as a sample for this study. Participant criteria consisted of both SWLDs who dropped out from STX USVI and did not return to complete a high school diploma, as well as those who did return to a high school diploma completion program. The total population of students attending STX USVI, Grades 9–12, in school year 2012–2013 with an IEP was 48.33%, of which the percentage of SWLDs who dropped out of high school prior to obtaining a high school diploma was 14.38% (The Virgin Islands Department of Education, 2014).

Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants

To guarantee compliance in meeting ethical and operational standards I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB-approval #11-01-18-0092826) and the National Institution of Health before collecting data. In designing a case study, ethical principles are applied to protect the rights of the participants. As the researcher, I had no direct authority relative to a participant who dropped out of school, nor of those who may have returned to complete a high school diploma. I made every

effort to ensure participants were treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions but securing their well-being.

I treated each participant with respect and dignity. Upon review of the informed consent, participants agreed to participate and provide a sign consent prior to interview. The informed consent form outlined (a) the purpose of the study, (b) that participation was strictly volunteer with no remuneration, and (c) that participants were permitted to withdraw from the study at any time. My goal was to establish an open avenue through which information was presented in honesty. Ethical practices and IRB standards were observed throughout the study. At no time were participants coerced to participate in this study. I enforced strict ethical standards and followed them with respect to the participants.

Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, my role was that of ethical observation. My responsibility as a researcher was 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 participants. Informed phone sessions with participants were made prior to the actual recording session in order to become familiar with the type of questions that I intended to ask them. Upon the interview, phone calls were made to verify each participant's attendance and willingness to continue in the research process. I sent welcome letters to each participant accepted into the study. I sent the letters via email. At the conclusion of the study, I sent thank you letters via email to each participant, which included a full explanation of the study.

As the researcher, I was careful to remain unbiased and neutral. If any biases occurred, I noted and recorded them; however, I made every effort to avoid biases. I encouraged each participant to speak their mind and to give their personal account of their experiences. The objective was to ensure that the participants' stories were accurate and recorded so that their voices were heard and understood.

Research Design and Rationale

Criteria for Participant Selection

My focus was to examine the experiences of SWLDs who dropped out of STX USVI high school. The population included in this study was made up of volunteers with learning disabilities, ages 18 years and older who had dropped out from the island of St. Croix public school system and were willing to participate in the study. Participant selection was made using purposive sampling. It was my intention to have a minimum of 12 participants for this study. I created flyers and distributed them at community centers, libraries, or other appropriate community locations. Further, I sought to have public service announcements via radio or social media describing the research study. As the culture of the islands is different from the mainland of the United States, it was easier to place flyers in key community sites and adult training education sites to recruit participants. A total of 15 participants responded to participate in the study. Twelve participants completed the survey in its entirety. Those who withdrew from the study prior to the interview phase stated work commitments, family obligations and time constraints were obstacles for not participating.

Data Collection

Interviews

I conducted one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data for the study using open-ended interview questions. I held these the interviews at times that were convenient for the participants in a quiet and private setting of their choice. This convenience was relative to the participants' comfort level. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The guiding, probing open ended questions were used to facilitate rich, meaningful conversations. I presented all participants with consent forms prior to commencing interviews via email or face-to-face.

I audio recorded all interviews using the Rev Voice Recorder application with the consent of the participants. The audio recording, dictation, and transcription app is a simple application through which the participants were able to have control over the recording process. I gave all participants instructions to turn on and off the recording application and instructed to do so at any time if they experienced any discomfort or wished to state information "off the record."

Once the study commenced, I informed the participants of the purpose of the study, which included a statement relative to the voluntary nature and withdrawal at will policy. If participants became uncomfortable, or became unable to continue participation, I made them aware of their options to withdraw by signing the participation consent form, which indicated they could withdraw anytime without consequence. During the course of this study, I examined the experiences of persons who dropped out of school, questions addressed issues that could be uncomfortable; hence, participants were also

informed that they may choose not to comment on any interview question without prejudice.

I assured the confidentiality of each participant by using a pseudonym name. Notably speaking, due to the possible disclosure of personal information that can endanger or harm and have negative results, I used a pseudonym. Data in the form of interview transcripts were stored in a locked file cabinet within my home. All documents and data collected will be destroyed by shredding after a period of 5 years as stipulated by Walden University's guidelines.

The qualitative data presented in this study primarily came from a case study research to explore the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of STX SWLDs who dropped out of high school. I used this qualitative case study research to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). My goal for this case study was to gain an understanding of how SWLDs viewed their high school experiences and what factors influenced SWLDs' decision to drop out of high school. Creswell (2013) suggested that undertaking a case study requires the researcher first to determine the broadest question that may be asked to gain insight into personal experiences. In this case study, the question "What experiences influenced SWLD's decision to drop out of a high school" was an essential question asked in the interviews. I used a qualitative case study research to examine the high school experiences of SWLDs, then recorded and explored those factors that led them to dropping out of high school.

Data Analysis

I recorded the participants' responses to the open-ended interview questions to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the participant responses (Creswell, 2007). In this case study, I also analyzed the qualitative data from in-depth interviews, member checking, and record review using an inductive qualitative analysis to examine SWLDs' high school experiences and potential factors SWLDs' described as influencing their decision to drop out. By using Maslow's (1943) approach, I identified that people are not motivated by rewards or desires, but instead by situations in which their basic needs are met. According to Maslow's theory, the lower level needs are those deficient needs in which motivation is unmet. Once the lower level needs are satisfied is only then an individual can meet higher level growth needs. I applied Maslow's theory to SWLDs in the school setting, each level of need became an important provision to keeping high school SWLD from dropping out. SWLDs need to feel there is worth in their education and obtaining a high school diploma. I identified themes found in the data and continuously triangulated between all sources of data collection during the study (Yin, 2013). I coded data and organized it into themes or recurring topics. From a review of themes, patterns were identified with evidential data. Subsequently, I classified the data and categorized it according to themes.

Coding of Data

Data was coded after collection in order to arrange information in a systematic order, in addition to classifying and categorizing in order to find themes and patterns. I utilized Spradley's (1980) six steps of domain analysis in the coding process to identify key terms and patterns in the data collection within the study. Step 1 was the

identification of terms which describe persons, places and things (e.g. student, family, teacher, employment) recorded in interview transcripts, questionnaire. Step 2 was the application of semantic relationships to the identified terms. Step 3 was the identification of commonalities in semantic relationships of anyone term that become a recurrent principle. Step 4 was the re-reading and reviewing all data sources for all possible recurrent principles. Step 5 was the examination of recurrent principles to identify the domain (e.g. in where, in what context, etc.) in which they existed. Step 6 was to designate recurrent principles present within multiple domains as themes.

According to Yin (2014), common limitations to case study research are interview interpretation of data, lack of generalizations, and the time involved in research. Following the review of the research questions presented within the project study, I identified the codes and themes based on the content of information given after each interview using Spradley's (1980) method. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them, then determined and assigned themes. During the process of transcription, I found similar traits that existed among high school SWLDs non-completers. I processed this data using Spradley's method, which involved breaking the data collected into categories and labeling these categories with a term base on the actual language of the participants' responses. This was necessary to allow me to determine the relevancy of consistencies and differences between participants. I also identified the themes that emerged relevant to the research questions.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, I utilized a case study research design in order to present an in-depth look at the experiences of SWLDs' who attended high school in

STX. Trustworthiness and credibility were essential and the foundation of this qualitative study to collect authentic data. To this end, I assumed participant responses to be reliable, honest and trustworthy. Triangulation of the data was necessary to determine the accuracy of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2009).

Member Checking

To determine the accuracy of the participants' responses, Creswell (2007) 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). To achieve member checking, I provided an opportunity for participants to verify my interpretation of their responses. The invitation to participate in member checking was provided either through email, phone conversation, or face-to-face contact. Member checking ensured the credibility of my case study because the participants were able to verify my interpretations. Member checking was not limited to a formal invitation to meet post-interview; but clarification of data occurred during the interview and attempts to reach out to participants occurred during the transcription of audio interview recordings.

Peer Debriefing

Member checking can be accompanied by another method, peer debriefing to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. As the focus of this research was SWLDs who dropped out of school, I sought a peer debriefer who had experience in teaching students that were returning to an educational program for the purpose of obtaining a high school diploma or general education degree (GED). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer debriefers enhance the credibility and the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by

providing “an external check on the inquiry process” (p. 301). Once I identified an appropriate debriefer who had 10 years of experience working as a guidance counselor in the GED program, I provided 25% of the transcribed data via email with no identified themes to avoid prejudicing the debriefer’s thought process and formulation of identifying the meaning or theme of the data. The debriefer also signed a consent form and their identity was protected. If my themes were not similar to those of the debriefer, I contacted the debriefer via email and asked for a rationale to determine why those themes were found not in unison.

Record Review

A final source of data to assist in the triangulation, hence, validity of the data, was the review of relevant STX UVI school district documents. Documents included, but were not be limited to, school improvement plans, demographic statistical data relative to high school dropouts in STX UVI, and high school records of dropouts if applicable to participants. This data was utilized in an attempt to affirm the participant statements collected. For example, if a participant stated they dropped out as they were failing all classes and had no hope, then being able to corroborate the participant’s grades via high school transcripts added validity and trustworthiness to the data collected.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I discussed a qualitative case study as a viable research method to present an examination of the experiences of SWLDs who attended high school on STX USVI, but who dropped out before obtaining a high school diploma. To guarantee compliance in meeting ethical and operational standards, I obtained approval from Walden University’s IRB (IRB approval #11-01-18-0092826) before collecting data. I

made every effort to ensure each participant was treated in an ethical manner, not only by respecting their decisions, but also securing their well-being. The goal for this study was to interview 12 to 15 participants from the STX USVI high school who dropped out and failed to obtain a high school diploma; only 12 successfully completed the interview. I discussed trustworthiness and credibility by engaging in a discussion of member checking, peer debriefer, and record review strategies. In Chapter 4, I present an analysis of the data collected and the findings.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the experiences of SWLDs who attended a public high school in the U.S. Virgin Islands, but who dropped out before obtaining a high school diploma. According to Wilson et al. (2016), a qualitative research design provides an opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of participants experiencing a common experience. The design for this study was a qualitative case study approach, which I applied to examine the experiences and beliefs for SWLDs primarily using in-depth interviews. The case study allowed me to gain an understanding of how SWLDs view their high school experiences and what factors impacted SWLDs' decision to drop out of high school. Chapter 4 is organized by research questions to include findings and an analysis of those findings. It also includes data collected from participants with learning disabilities who dropped out of school in STX. Details of the school experiences of each participant were recorded from the participants' perspectives.

Data Gathering

After the approval was obtained from the Walden University IRB, I selected a sample of 12 participants with learning disabilities to participate in this case study research. I selected a case study to conduct an in-depth examination of a real-life phenomenon. I recruited participants for this research study based on the placement of research information flyers posted at libraries, community centres, and adult education training sites located on the island of St. Croix. When potential participants contacted me via email (per the flyer direction), I screened the participants to ensure each met the study

criteria of having previously been identified as 18 years and older, an SWLD who had an IEP during high school attendance, attended a STX public high school, and dropped out of high school without completing high school diploma requirements. Once I identified potential participants as meeting the study criteria, a consent form was provided (either emailed or in-person pending participant's preference) for review and participant signature.

This case study was based on two research questions to examine what factors STX SWLDs' identified as influencing their decision to drop out of high school. The findings answered the following research questions:

RQ1. What elements of Maslow's hierarchy of needs do SWLDs identify as contributing to dropping out of high school?

RQ2. What missing elements within the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if put in place, might have prevented dropping out from high school?

I focused this research using the research questions listed. To answer Research Questions 1 and 2, I collected data from 12 participants through interviews.

Findings herein include data collected from semi in-depth interviews of the 12 participants. Each interview ranged from 45–60 minutes long. During the interview, I gathered background information to gain an understanding of the participants' lives and to realize the effect dropping out had on their lives. I audio recorded all interviews and took handwritten notes during the interview process. The interview process took a period of 1 week, during which I took measures to ensure the participants' identities and data analysis were not disclosed by using a letter for recordings and final analysis. I kept track of data using a journal to create a table in order to determine common themes that emerge

based on the participants' responses. In this chapter, I present the findings pertaining to each research question followed by a summary of the findings.

Participant's Profile

Table 1 shows the number of participants, gender, the disability, grade level at the time of dropout, whether they returned to school to obtain their GED test or high school diploma, and if they were currently employed in their professional field. The gender makeup of the participants was three women and nine men of individuals with disabilities. Iachini et al. (2016) commented that the shift from middle school to high school is the most critical stage during a student's academic experience. Hence, as shown in Table 1, the majority of individuals with a disability dropped out in their 10th-grade year. Gottfried (2014) and Marchbanks et al. (2015) reported that the ninth-grade year is the most crucial grade level in the area of dropout prevention. An analysis of the results from the research of McKee and Caldarella (2016) also stated that by ninth grade, students who continued to be academically challenged would have a 75% probability of leaving school prematurely. Hence the results of Table 1 displaying the individuals with a disability who had dropout in their 10th-grade year.

Table 2. *Participant Profiles*

Participant	Gender	Age	Disability	Grade Level at Time of Dropout	Returned for GED or High School Diploma	Employed
Participant A	M	30	SLD/Reading	10th Grade	No	No
Participant B	M	35	SLD/Math and ADHD	10th Grade	Yes	Yes
Participant C	F	22	Dyslexic and Mutism (Selective)	10th Grade	Yes	Yes
Participant D	M	30	APD	10th Grade	Yes	No
Participant E	M	17	Dyscalculia	9th Grade	No	No
Participant F	M	34	LD	9th Grade	No	No
Participant G	M	26	LD	12th Grade	No	Yes
Participant H	F	20	LD and Speech Impediment	10th Grade	Yes	Yes
Participant I	M	40	LD & Handicap	11th Grade	No	No
Participant J	M	33	Dyslexic and ADHD	10th Grade	Yes	Yes
Participant K	F	55	SLD/Reading	10th Grade	Yes	Yes
Participant L	M	36	LD and Deaf and Hard of Hearing	10th Grade	Yes	Yes

In the following discussion, I present participants' experiences and underlying reasons for dropping out of high school. I categorized underlying causes into four themes of: (a) lack of teacher and administrator support, (b) lack of family support, (c) peer and adult ridicule, and (d) peer pressure and behaviour problems. Participants (five out of 12) reported a lack of teacher and administrative support as a primary reason for dropping out. While three out of five reported it was either peer and adult ridicule or a lack of

family support as a significant factor for dropping out. The least-reported issue of peer pressure and behavioral problems was reported by only two of 12 participants as the impetus for dropping out of high school.

Data Analysis

I derived the findings in this case study from the voices of participants who dropped out of the public high school in St. Croix, USVI. Twelve participants volunteered for this study and participated in interviews ranging from 45–60 minutes each and terminated when data saturation was met as the participant no longer had new information to share. I assigned each research participant a letter of the alphabet to ensure confidentiality. I assigned a number to each audio recorded interview that I transcribed. Following the review of the research questions presented within this case study, I identified codes and themes based on the content of the data collected. I used a journal to identify each participant's responses. I also used follow-up questions to find out the current status on what impact dropping out had on them.

When qualitatively analysed, five themes emerged from the recorded perceptions of individuals with learning disabilities concerning their high school dropout experiences. Coding of data was ongoing, hence providing for opportunities to clarify semantic relationships in the project study. I was interested in finding similar traits that existed among high school SWLDs noncompleters. As a result, I processed the data using Spradley's (1980) domain analysis. I coded data after collection in order to arrange information in a systematic order, in addition to classifying and categorizing in order to find themes and patterns. I implemented Spradley's (1980) six-step domain analysis in the coding process to identify key terms and patterns in the data collection within the

study. I followed these steps to identify patterns within the data: (a) I identified terms that described persons, places, and things (e.g. student, family, teacher, employment); (b) I recorded interview transcripts and applied semantic relationships to the identified terms; (c) I identified commonalities in semantic relationships of any one term that became a recurrent principle; (d) I re-read and reviewed all data sources for all possible recurrent principles; (e) I examined recurrent principles to identify what domain (e.g. in where, in what context, etc.) they existed within; and (f) I designated any recurrent principles present within multiple domains as themes.

I transcribed the data collected from the recorded interviews and then color coded emerging themes. According to Spradley's (1980) domain analysis, the second stage of data analysis is to identify semantic relationships of concepts and themes. For example, if the phrase "financial difficulty" was said, I highlighted it. I also highlighted some phrases that were mentioned continuously, such as "family issues" and "employment." Moreover, I grouped related catchphrases according to the emerging themes. I compared the coded data, and identified the emerging themes based on the research questions. I collected the data from the participant's profile to enhance the analysis and provide an understanding of why SWLDs dropout of high school without obtaining a diploma. Consistency of the data was displayed through common themes. I aligned the coded responses to the research questions, and categorized the emerging themes. The data were essential because the using a case study allowed me to verify the validity of my research data. Table 2 shows common themes that emerged from the responses of the participants.

Table 3. *Identified Emerging Themes Relevant to Research Question*

Research Question	Themes
Research Question 1. <i>How did the deficiency of Maslow's self-esteem needs, impact SWLDs decision to drop out of high school?</i>	Theme 1. Lack of Teacher and administration support Theme 2. Lack of Family Support Theme 3. Peer Ridicule Theme 4. Peer Pressure and Behavioural Issues
Research Question 2. <i>What missing elements within the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if put in place, might have prevented dropping out from high school?</i>	Theme 1. Self-Actualization

Emerging Themes

I conducted this qualitative case study to examine the experiences of SWLDs who attended a public high school on STX, but who dropped out before obtaining a high school diploma. I used a case study approach to obtain an understanding of underlying causes resulting in participants to drop out of high school. Through face-to-face and semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant responses were transcribed and reviewed to determine commonalities and differences. As the themes emerged, I correlated them to elements of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. They are shown in Figure 1.

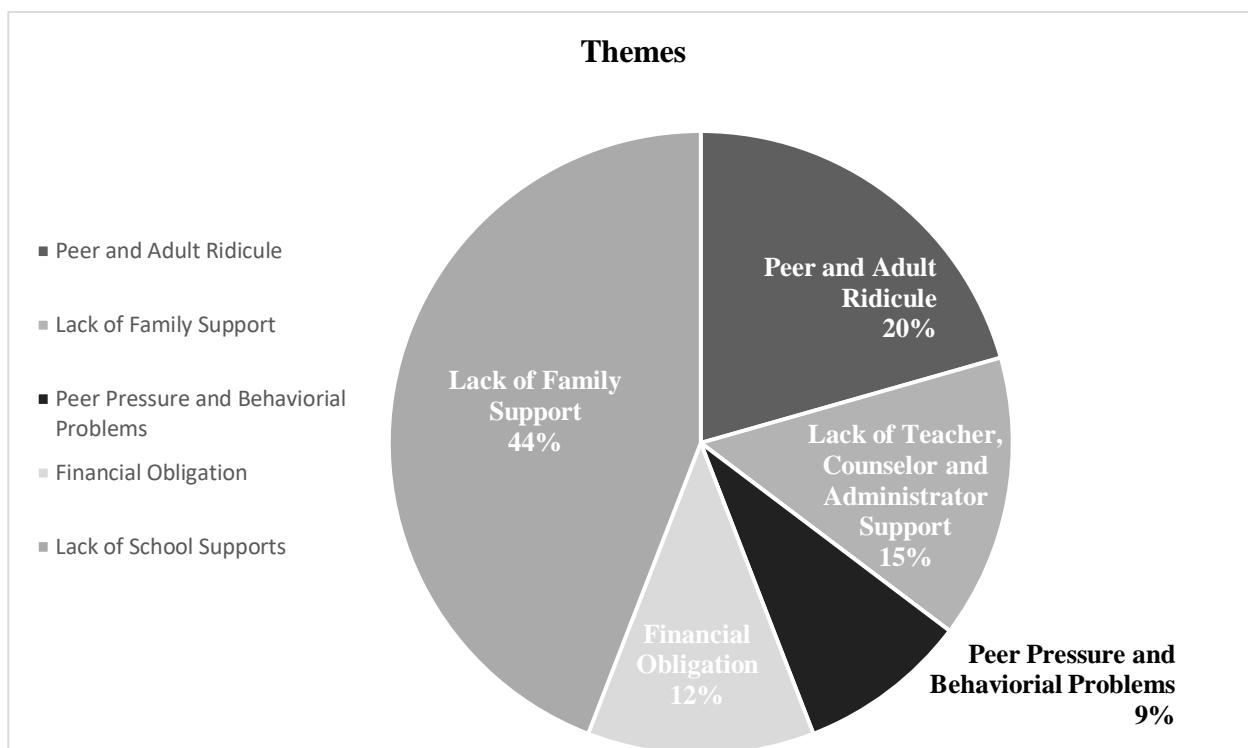


Figure 2. Emerging themes.

Research Question 1 (RQ1)

RQ1: How did the deficiency of Maslow's self-esteem needs, impact SWLDs decision to drop out of high school? Participant responses clearly indicated that a lack of self-esteem, Maslow's (1943) fourth level of needs was a significant factor that contributed to dropping out of high school. While 100% of participants stated they had low self-esteem, their underlying causes for developing low self-esteem varied. While one participant (8%) of the 12 interviewed identified a physical disability as being a remarkable factor contributing to low self-esteem, the remaining participants expressed Maslow's hierarchy of safety, love, and belongingness as being unmet throughout high school.

Five themes emerged as underlying causes for dropping out of high school: (a) lack of teacher and administrator support, (b) lack of family support, (c) peer and adult ridicule, (d) peer pressure and behaviour problems, and (e) financial obligation (see Figure 1). As an adult either employed or seeking employment, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs continued to drive participants' self-perception and had long term impacts on personal and financial goals. The following breakdown of each theme integrates Maslow's hierarchy of needs with participant experiences.

Theme 1: Lack of teacher and administration support. The participants experienced lack of teacher and administration support. The lack of teacher and administration support of the implementation intervention programs led participants to believe they did not care nor have any interest in them. Furthermore, the impact the administrators and teachers play as role models in the participant's life led to the decision of dropping out of school. Participant A reported:

I tried to get help from my SPED (special education) teacher and the general education teacher, but I didn't get the help I was looking for. The school hired teachers from the Philippines that did know much English. I would get answers without no explanation to the questions.... I hated to read...I didn't know how to read...my teacher spoke little English, which was hard for me to understand...so I skip school and later dropout.

Whereas Participant K shared:

When we had instruction time in school, I was miserable because I couldn't read what was in front of me. I would have several parental conferences to discuss my inability to read...plan would be in place but after the meeting, nothing happens. I

continued being miserable. My mechanic teacher was disgusted of me and he actually took me off the group I was in in rebuilding an engine...so I dropout and work with my dad. As I think about the bullying and seeing the disgusted face my mechanics teacher had when he saw me, I literally didn't have a chance in staying in school. I did not have the backing from the principals and my teacher to stay in school.... that's sad.

According to Sahin et al. (2016), students feed off of adult figures. Negative behaviors and attitudes posed by school administrators and teachers towards students can lead to dropout. Failing to provide effective intervention programs that can assist students staying in school would encourage students to remain in school and obtain a high school diploma. Participant B had a similar story, he stated:

Having ADD got the best of me. I was always in fights. The school staff was tired of me and was quick to send me to the alternative program. But my dad gives me a second chance of life by working with him. I saw the money I was making, and I drop out. Now I was up for a promotion but was denied because I did not receive a high school diploma. Now I have been demoted and getting less money than I was making.... furious I am... I blame the school. Where were these programs to keep potential students in school...? they (teachers and school staff) mess me up.

Participant F also reported:

I dropped out of school in the ninth grade because I was extremely slow.... don't know why they stick me in a class that I didn't belong. I receive little to no supports in school. I needed to be in a class where I can receive one-to-one services.... don't know how I swing it that long, but ninth grade was the end for

me. It was really hard...very overwhelming...scary. Most of the time, I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be in a smaller class...I think I could have survive being in a small class. I was unhappy, I started selling drugs. No one took notice of my failing grades and no interest of being in school. I give up...I drop out of school.

Theme 2. Lack of motivation from family support. Participants' lack of family support was often perceived by participants manifesting as lack of motivation (See Table 3). Of the 12 participants, 31% indicated that they lacked motivation to attend school, engage in course work and complete homework assignments. Participants who expressed the lack of motivation rooted in lack of parental support attributed that lack of support as indicative of not having their basic needs met.

Participant A stated, "Though I loved my grandmother and I know she means well, but I wish my parents had been around more often and give me the support to stay in school."

Participant D commented, "I was unmotivated and knew no one cared for my academic well-being.... still have a low self-esteem."

Participant F recalled, "I craved the attention from my parents and teachers...but never got it."

Participant H remembered, "Since I didn't have the family support, I found love elsewhere but was ridicule because of the way I talk.....this give me a low self-esteem and I drop out of school when I became pregnant."

Participant A was raised by a single-family household with his grandmother. Dupéré et al. (2015) believed persons born into single parent families tend to experience

about three times as many family structure-related transitions as persons born into married-couple families, which also tended to have an impact on dropping of school. Not having both parents in his life became a strain for Participant A.

Participant H, a 20-year-old dropout mother of twins, did not express that teachers and administrators failed to provide academic support, but rather indicated that a lack of family support was the primary reason for dropping along with being ridiculed by her peers. Further, ridicule from peers contributed to a feeling of low self-esteem and her desire to stay in school. Participant H was diagnosed with a specific learning disability and a speech impediment. This notion that students who lack family support in reaching academic goals are at risk for dropping out of high school is well documented in Rud et al. (2016).

Participant H developed a low self-esteem, and she “tried to find affection through boys.” According to Weiner (2010), “Low self-esteem, a low expectancy of future success, hopelessness, helplessness, shame, and humiliation promotes the decision to drop out of school” (p. 33). Participant H stated she “found love from her classmate and became pregnant,” which later devastated her when her babies’ father “laughed, called her names, and made fun of her speech.” At 6 months pregnant, medical complications required her to have complete bed rest and she made the decision to drop out of school. Participant H simply stated, “my family was not supportive of me academically before or after the twins’ birth.” The literature examining high school pregnancy and dropout rates (Rosenberg et al., 2015) was clear that the lack of family support combined with pregnancy is statistically high.

During the interview Participant H revealed she was currently attending the Adult Education Program and would be graduating next year and was learning to ask for help. She recalled that while intervention supports in high school included a special education teacher and a speech therapist that those services were not “real helpful” as she only “saw them (special education teacher and speech therapist) once a month and at the Individualized Education Planning (IEP) meeting.”

Participant J was a 33-year-old male, dropped out of the 10th grade because he was unmotivated, had no family support, and had few peer relationships. With a diagnosis of dyslexia and ADHD, he stated “it’s hard to organize thoughts... and even harder to keep still.” Participant J indicated that he wanted to stay in school but the “streets were calling.” Participant J perceived his disabilities as insurmountable at times and stated, “I am all over the place. It’s like I have an itch and I need to scratch it, yet the itch is all over my body, not just one spot.”

During high school, Participant J’s father had little involvement in supporting the family thus requiring Participant J’s mother to have two jobs. As Participant J was the oldest, caring for two siblings “made dropping out of school much easier.” It also contributed to Participant J’s “employment” in the streets, which led to arrests. The first arrest resulted in a warning and release; however, Participant J “got an eye opener” when he was arrested a second time and was again released with a warning. Participant J stated, “Getting caught the second time and being a father, I needed to change my life around. I am now taking GED classes and will be taking the test soon.”

Participant J’s decision to drop out due to family reasons aligned with the assertions of Schargel and Smink (2014), and further, his realization that a high school

equivalency diploma was critical to a successful future, was also common in the literature of McConnell and Kubina (2014).

Participants needed to receive basic needs of physiological, safety and love from family before motivation develop. Pelletier, Dion, Tucson, and Green-Demers (1999) proposed that environmental motivation occurs for four different classes of reasons: strategy beliefs, ability beliefs, effort beliefs, and helplessness beliefs.

That is, individuals may experience an absence of motivation to perform environmentally friendly behaviors because of the belief that ecological behaviors (e.g., recycling) are ineffective in producing the desired outcome, the belief that they do not have the personal ability to enact the required task, the belief that they cannot maintain the effort that is required by the behavior, or, finally, the belief that they are simply powerless in effectuating a suitable outcome. (p. 568)

Participants who expressed they lacked motivation in school and a feeling of belonging, also stated education had little to no value. Of the 12 participants, five (42%) participants stated they dropped out of school because of a lack of family support academically. For some participants, family support was needed to fulfil Maslow's (1943) lowest level of needs of physiological and safety as participants assisted in providing the family with financial support. According to Participant L,

My family was not around, maybe it's because I was always on the streets hanging out with my friends smoking weed, but they did not show no support for my schooling...so I didn't care....no motivation...smoke all day everyday.... skipping school and hanging with my friends...my life. No one caring where I am

or what I am doing. Seeing my friends die in the streets whether from drug overdose, being shot or was incarcerated became a wakeup call. Being a single dad of 3 girls is overwhelming as well. I now see the importance of staying in school. I pray many nights that my girls don't become another statistic as I...I will be there for them and give them what they need survive school.

Maslow's theory purported that *safety* is a fundamental need required to reach higher self-actualization needs. When students do not have basic physiological and safety needs met, the likelihood that a sense of belonging and self-actualization is slim.

Theme 3. Peer pressure and ridicule. Participants A, C, D, E, I, and L reported that peer pressure significantly contributed to their decision to drop out.

Participant A recalled, "Because I didn't know how to read and I hated reading in class aloud, my friends made fun at me....so eventually I dropout."

Participant C stated,

My biggest mistake I made in high school was telling my parents I was raped and by a family member.... I was ridicule(d) by my family and especially my close friends when I became pregnant.... I couldn't stand that I was no longer in the 'in crowd.'

Participant D said, "I was tired of being bullied just because I speak funny."

Participant E stated, "I always in fight because I was the one being the bully."

Participant I added, "The way I look, and walk was a problem...my high school years was frightened...always being beaten up."

Participant K recalled, "I love my dad, my dad saves me from bullying every day because I couldn't read."

Participant L stated, “I was constantly high when I was in school and would skip school with my friends to hang in the streets...I wanted to stay in school, but I also wanted to be popular.”

Peer pressure was reported by participants and resulted in inappropriate behaviors, criminal activity, and the adoption of a negative attitude toward school, which affirmed Pianta and Walsh’s (2014) notion that the type and/or lack of peer relationships was a frequent underlying cause for dropping out. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs cannot be realized if students lack peer relationships and perceive peer pressure as intolerable; hence, students’ development of self-esteem will be problematic.

The gratification of loving oneself and having the acceptance of having others love you is fundamental to building self-esteem. Self-esteem enables a student to make appropriate choices, such as Participant B’s experience. According to Participant B, he saw himself as follows:

I recognized that my friends in school impacted me in a negative way. I realize I couldn’t remove myself from the negative peer pressure without leaving the school itself. When my dad offered me, a job working at the oil refinery, I took that as a blessing. I remember I had my third fight and the school’s their recommendation was for me to be sent to the alternative program. I didn’t want to go there. I saw it as another place to continue using drugs and getting into more fights. I hated myself and my friends for leading me in that path. So, when the job opportunity arises, I took it and dropped out of school.

However, according to Participant H, “I wanted to belong...I kinda sought affection through boys but was ridicule because of my speech impediment.... funny I still have

low self-esteem.” This feeling of ridicule was further heightened when she became pregnant.

Theme 4. Behavioural issues. Behavior concerns were reported by two participants (17%) as a primary reason for dropping out of school. Participant B stated, “You know I realize my friends was not for me.... I started looking for a way out from being away from them... my so-call friends were instigators. They pressured me to fight...I have a nickname through them “Nuts” ...I wanted out.”

When the basic needs of safety are not met, then neither is reaching the stage of belonging. Participant B felt “threatened” by peers in school and exhibited inappropriate behaviors resulting in school referrals and enrollment in alternative school programs rather than being permitted to stay in the general education program. Participant B also reported, “Nuts is what they call me, I was crazy...always fighting. My friends were my instigators, my biggest cheerleaders and my huge downfall. Having ADHD, I was always hype.”

Participant E experienced negative consequences because of problems with authority and the law. According to Participant E, he recalled:

Because of continuous fights in and out of school, like at the horse track, bowling alley and even at the movie theatre, I spent three years in the Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC)...it felt like forever being there. I realize I hate male authority...telling me what to do...I hated the law. I know I was spoil. My parents were influential citizens in the community. My mom was a principal and my dad were the superintendent, so I used their status to my benefit. But I never knew they would actually leave me in YRC.... thinking back, I had 100% family

support from them, but I always had to defend myself when my friends found out who they were. As I got older I used to hang out with this crowd that that taught me about the street life...I think because of them I hated the law...I hated being told what to do...I was the boss in my own castle which was the streets.

Participant J stated:

The streets were calling me...unmotivated to attend school and no family support. I couldn't keep focus. Ironically enough I had a small part of me that wanted to stay in school...but I skip a lot, couldn't keep track of my work...fell way behind I was a loner with ADHD...I am all over the place. It's like I have an itch and I need to scratch it, yet the itch is all over my body, not just one spot. I did try to stay in school, but the streets were calling me...I answered and dropout out of school.

Participant B, E and J were diagnosed as having ADHD behaviors that hindered their learning. According to Evans, Fite, Hendrickson, Rubens, and Mages (2015) ADHD manifests aggressive behaviors that are associated with peer rejection. Hence, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs emphasizes that belonging is a vital component for the prescription of human need. This need must be met to achieve a sense of self-worth. Therefore, emotional relationships drive human behavior.

When participants did not receive the services from special education to cope and deal with their behavior in and out of a classroom setting, the administration suspended or referred participants to alternative educational settings. According to Participant L, when fight, referrals were made to be enroll in an alternative program. That was a quick fix for them, to see me leave, but not a quick fix for me...my problem was

still there. I wished the principals at my high school created an intervention program for those potential dropouts...you know if this was in place I would have stayed in school.

Theme 5. Financial obligations. Several participants stated they were obligated to assist with their family's finances. Four participants stated that being employed took priority over education as their families struggled financially due to parental illness, death of a family member, or living in a single-parent household.

Participant J stated, "I felt obligated to assist with the financial burden of my mom...since my dad died."

Whereas Participant G explained, "...my dad died unexpectedly...I had a very good excuse to drop out of school...my mother beg me to stay home, work, and help raise my three younger siblings...I was happy to dropout because I barely passed the 11th grade."

Participants who left school to join the workforce had to fulfil basic needs of Maslow's hierarchy of physiology and safety before developing higher levels of self-esteem and self-actualization.

Research Question 2

What missing elements within the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, if put in place, might have prevented dropping out from high school? The missing element within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs that prevented the participants' decision from dropping out of school was Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Participant L admitted that if the administrators at the high schools created intervention programs for at-risk dropouts he would have stayed in school. Forty-four percent of the participants' stated

that guidance counselors, special education teachers, and administrators demonstrated a lack of compassion for their individual needs to allow them to be academically successful. When educators do not provide positive interventions that meet students' physiological, safety and sense of belonging on the Maslow hierarchy, then the probability of students satisfying higher level needs such as self-actualization diminish.

Maslow's (1943) theory of self-actualization relates to the gratification of becoming "what you are capable of becoming and what you have the potential to become." Self-actualization is the missing element that 100% of participants did not identify as part of their school experience but did express as either regret or a desire to complete their GED. While 100% of participants identified they lacked basic needs, only 50% identified that self-actualization could manifest if a GED was obtained.

Data collection resulted in the emergence of five themes that examined how Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs operationalized in SWLDs' decisions relative to dropping out of high school. Underlying causes of dropping out were rooted in a lack of basic needs of physiology and safety, as well as loving and belonging. Higher level needs, self-esteem and self-actualization were achieved by 0% of participants.

Participants in this study affirmed Arteaga's (2015) finding that indicators of potential SWLD dropouts include (a) behavioral infractions, (b) low performance or academic failure, (c) increased absenteeism, (d) poor retention, (e) socioeconomic background, and (f) low self-worth. These factors became significant in participant's development of self and acceptance in high school. When participants did not develop or experience self-esteem and a sense of belonging, the motivation and desire to successfully complete a high school diploma was minimal to none.

Discrepant Cases

Six discrepant cases were found in the data collection. Each participant realized the necessity in obtaining a high school credential and sought to complete a high school diploma post dropping out. Whether the participants reported their self-realization of a high school diploma as it impacts their well-being, employment, or family, all participants understood the level of self-actualization. The participants realized that they have achieved life goals in obtaining a high school diploma. They have achieved self-fulfilment, the tendency to actually realize that they have reached their full potential in attaining a high school diploma.

Participant L dropped out of school, yet he understood the importance of obtaining a high school diploma for him and his three girls. Participant L saw first-hand how dropping out of school impacted his friends. As stated by Participant L, "...my fellow classmates have either died, got incarcerated, can't find a job, or are selling drugs." Nevertheless, Participant L enrolled in the Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD) sign language class. He also obtained his GED through the Department of Human Services Vocational Rehabilitation Program and is gainfully employed as a para legal at a law firm.

Whereas Participant C dropped out because she was raped, pregnant, and embarrassed to return back to school. Participant C indicated that she "wished the guidance counselors were more helpful in assisting" her situation. Participant C stated she now "knows the importance of completing high school because I know having a high school diploma will get me better jobs." Clearly, Participant C connected better

employment with achieving a GED. Participant C attends Adult Education Night program and will graduate with her a high school diploma in next year.

Participant D dropped out of school because “no one cared” about his academic well-being. As he grew older, he stated he realized the need to achieve a high school diploma: “Being a dropout, (he) cannot find a decent job...lives with (his) parents” and reported he has a low self-esteem. Further, Participant D realized while starting GED classes that “it is harder as an adult to understand and communicate with people.” Though Participant D stated “it’s hard in keeping up with his classes,” he also stated he “is taking one class at a time” and is determined to acquire his GED.

Participant H dropped out of school because she was pregnant, sought attention from her boyfriend, and had a speech impediment. Participant H stated she “learned the hard way,” yet realized the importance in obtaining a high school diploma. Participant H is attending the Adult Education Program and will graduate next year.

When Participant J got caught by the police and released with a warning the second time around, he decided to turn his life around. Participant J had a 2-year-old daughter and wanted to change because of her. He wanted to marry her mom but wanted to be stable. Participant J finally went back to school and is working toward his GED. Lastly, Participant K started working for his dad after he dropped out of school and later decided he wanted to attend a technical school. Regretfully, Participant K needed to obtain his high school diploma. Participant K admitted that he should have stayed in school. He stated he lost a lot of money not knowing how to read but that it is never too late to go back to school. Participant K is now a certifiable Benz technician in Orlando, Florida.

As reported by the participants, if they would have received the services of support while attending high school the probability of their staying in school may have increase. In conclusion, the findings of these six cases revealed the participants wanted to stay in school. Yet under the circumstances, life challenges hindered them from doing so.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of a qualitative case study on high school experiences of SWLDs living in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands who dropped out and failed to achieve a high school diploma. St. Croix is only 22 miles long with a population of 50,601; therefore, this project was only conducted on the island of St. Croix. Hence, the findings were different compared to the mainland.

The foundation of the study was supported by the data collected. Utilizing a conceptual framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, participants' personal high school experiences were examined in an effort to understand factors leading to participants' choice to drop out. In Chapter 4, I presented data from the interviews of 12 participants that discussed their experiences as SWLDs who dropped out of high school.

The stories told by each participant added insight into the dropout problem in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. I reviewed and analysed records using an inductive qualitative analysis to examine SWLDs' high school experiences and potential factors SWLDs' described as influencing their decision to drop out. Following the review of the research questions presented within this case study, I identified codes and themes based on the content of the data collected. I used Spradley's (1980) domain analysis in the coding process to identify key terms and patterns. I transcribed the data collected from the recorded interviews and color-coded the emergent themes. According to Spradley's

(1980) domain analysis, the second stage of data analysis is to identify semantic relationships of concepts and themes. For example, if the word “financial difficulty” was commented then it was highlighted. Some phrases that were mentioned continuously such as “family issues” and “employment” were also highlighted. Moreover, related catchphrases were grouped according to the emerging themes. I compared the coded data, and identified the emerging themes based on the research questions. Using the data I collected from the participant’s profile enhanced the analysis and provided an understanding of why SWLDs dropout of high school without obtaining a diploma. Consistency of the data was displayed through common themes. I aligned the coded responses to the research questions, and categorized the emerging themes. The data was essential because the case study gave validity to the research data.

I coded data continually, hence providing opportunities to clarify semantic relationships in the project study. As such, I identified lack of motivation, lack of family support, low peer relationships, and behavioral issues as common themes and determined the relevancy to the researcher study. Research Question 1 asked what elements of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs did SWLDs who dropped out identified as contributing to dropping out of high school. Maslow’s theory emphasizes that belonging is a vital component for the prescription of human needs. According to Maslow, this need must be met to achieve a sense of self-worth. Therefore, emotional relationships drive human behavior. Maslow’s theory infers that a basic need of safety is necessary for a person to self-actualize. In this study participants expressed that they experience the basic element of feeling safe either in school or at home and identified a sense of safety was an

underlying contributing cause to dropping out. Participants were clear that family support was missing in their high school experience.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs plays a role in peer relationship based on esteem needs. Students demonstrated the notion of wanted to be liked and accepted by their peers—the gratification of loving oneself and having the acceptance of having others love you. The participants need to feel that they belong and are accepted. Participants who identified they did not have a sense of belonging to the larger school community reported they lacked motivation to stay in school. Participants reported that while in high school they were unmotivated, lacked family support and peer relationships, exhibited behavior issues, and assisted in meeting family financial obligations. These factors all contributed on the participants' decision to drop out of school.

Research Question 2 examined whether the missing elements within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs might have prevented the participants' decision to drop out. The missing element within Maslow's hierarchy of needs that prevented the participants' decision from dropping out of school was Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Six discrepant cases were found in the data collection. Each participant realized the necessity in obtaining a high school credential and sought to complete a high school diploma post dropping out. The participants' responses revealed that over 90% of the participants identified they had growth needs. Despite the recognition that there was a need to attain personal and academic growth, only 50% perceived themselves as having potential to engage in self-actualization strategies to become successful in school or work settings. Self-actualization relates to the gratification of becoming “what you are capable of

becoming and what you have the potential to become.” This was the missing element that all participants craved but seemed unable to reach. Maslow’s (1943) theory was introduced and offered an unfathomable framework for examining factors that contribute to dropout SWLDs. In an effort to improve their growth needs, the participants realized their potential in seeking self-fulfilment for themselves and their families. Their personal growth was a steppingstone to becoming a better human being and learning the desire to become anything that one is cable of becoming.

Trustworthiness: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are important in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility and trustworthiness were the foundation of this qualitative study and were used to decide whether the data was accurate and if it fully represented the reality of participants’ thoughts. I used the technique of member checking in this qualitative study to establish the credibility. To achieve member checking, I provided an opportunity for participants to verify my interpretation of their responses. I provided the invitation to participate in member checking either through email, phone conversation, or face-to-face contact. By using member checking, I ensured the credibility of my case study because the participants were able to verify my interpretations. Member checking was not limited to a formal invitation to meet post-interview; but ,clarification of data occurred during the interview and attempts to reach out to participants occurred during the transcription of audio interview recordings. Using the above measure of credibility ensured that the data conveyed was true and credible.

One way to ensure credibility and transferability is to be sure that those interviewed, in this case SWLDs, have the experience to discuss what the researcher seeks to explore (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability contributes to the interpretation of the data. In this project study, in order to arrange information in a systematic order, I coded the data, then classified and categorized it in order to find patterns. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that it is the researcher's responsibility to provide rich, thick description of data in order to make a judgment about it fitting in with other possible contexts. In other words, I analyzed the participants' answers to the open-ended questions, which served to increase the case study's ability toward transferability.

Dependability refers to the involvement of participants evaluating the findings and the interpretation and recommendations of the study to make sure that they are all supported by the data received from the informants of the study (Johnston et al., 2017). Triangulation is one way for the credibility of data to support the dependability of this research study. The credibility of the data was the review of relevant STX USVI school district documents. Documents included, but were not limited to, school improvement plans, demographic statistical data relative to high school dropouts in STX USVI, and high school records of dropouts if applicable to participants. I used this data in an attempt to affirm the participant statements collected. For example, if a participant stated they dropped out as they were failing all classes and had no hope, then being able to corroborate the participant's grades via high school transcripts added credibility and trustworthiness to the data collected.

Baxter and Eyles (1997) referred to confirmability as when the results of an inquiry were confirmed or corroborated by other researchers. This is achieved by

triangulation, in which the findings are not ‘figments of the researcher’s imagination’, but rather derived from the data collected. In this project study, to determine the accuracy of the participants’ responses and to keep track of data, I used a journal to create a table in order to determine common themes that emerge based on the participants’ responses.

Chapter 5

Recommendations and Conclusions

Students with learning disabilities often have a more difficult time than their nondisabled peers in completing high school graduation requirements. Dropping out of high school is a choice that negatively impacts a student's life into adulthood. The examination of SWLD experiences who dropped out of school in this study affirmed that SWLDs who drop out experience higher rates of unemployment (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), prison/incarceration (Rud et al. 2016), poor health, and reliance on welfare and government assistance (Dupéré et al., 2017). Lawson and Shields (2014) indicated that nationally 65% of SWLDS fail to complete their schooling. In comparison, the overall USVI SWLD dropout rate of 17.1% (NCES, 2016) does not appear significant. However, when considering the STX district alone, which makes up 66% of the total USVI SWLD dropouts, the need to better understand this problem clearly is evident. Furthermore, within the USVI there is limited research concerning dropout rates of SWLD in STX.

The literature review provided a brief overview that entailed the background of dropout SWLDs on STX. I used two research questions to guide this analysis to examine the high dropout rate among SWLDs on STX:

RQ1. How did the deficiency of Maslow's self-esteem needs, impact SWLDs decision to drop out of high school?

RQ2. What missing elements within the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if put in place, might have prevented SWLDs from dropping out of high school?

Utilizing a conceptual framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, I examined participants' personal high school experiences in an effort to understand factors

leading to participants' choice to drop out. Through semistructured -in-depth interviews collected from 12 participants, SWLDs who dropped out of high school, four themes emerged. In Research Question 1, I examined whether a deficiency of Maslow's self-esteem needs, and the impact thereof, contributed to SWLDs' decision to drop out. Participant data analysis revealed underlying causes of dropping out were: (a) lack of teacher and administrator support, (b) lack of family support, (c) peer and adult ridicule, and (d) peer pressure and inappropriate behaviors. Additional factors voiced by participants contributing to dropping out were financial obligations and pregnancy.

I designed Research Question 2 to identify which missing elements within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if any, may have prevented SWLDs from dropping out. The primary missing element was identified by participants as self-actualization. Participants' responses indicated that 90% lacked the self-esteem and/or motivation to become self-actualized and remain in school despite the difficulties. Further, of those 90% identifying a lack of self-actualization as contributing to dropping out, 50% stated that they are now in the process of engaging in self-actualization activities to include employment, preparing for a job promotion, and completing a GED. Participants identified this awareness of self-actualization, in part, as a result from supportive family members, peer and adult encouragement, and no longer fearing peer ridicule or peer pressure.

Interpretation of Findings

The literature review was an overview of research studies on SWLDs who drop out of high school. Within the USVI, SWLDs face many challenges in obtaining a high school diploma. Dropout rates of SWLDs are significantly higher in the U.S. Virgin

Islands when compared to dropout rates on the mainland (Jia et al., 2016). Since the 2014–2015 fiscal year, State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR) Indicator noted that 15% of SWDLs drop out of high school in the STX district while in the STT/STJ district 5.12% SWDLs were recorded as high school dropouts. This is significant because the STT/STJ district reports indicated that 66% of all USVI SWLDs who dropout attends the STX school district.

I aligned the 14 interview questions with the research questions to examine what factors STX SWLDs identified as influencing their decision to drop out of high school. I used Spradley's (1980) method as a coding system to cluster themes and group data. When common threads emerged, I grouped them in tables to show the relativeness to the research questions.

My goal for this study was to gain understanding of the insights of 12 participants who told their stories about their experiences prior to making the decision to drop out of high school. The data I collected resulted in the emergence of five themes that examined how Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs played out in SWLDs' decisions relative to dropping out of high school. Underlying causes of dropping out were rooted in a lack of basic needs of physiology and safety, as well as loving and belonging. Higher level needs, self-esteem and self-actualization, were achieved by 0% of participants. Participants in this study affirmed Arteagan's (2015) findings that indicators of potential SWLD dropouts include (a) behavioral infractions, (b) low performance or academic failure, (c) increased absenteeism, (d) poor retention, (e) socioeconomic background, and (f) low self-worth. These factors became significant in participants development of self and acceptance in high school. When participants did not develop or experience self-

esteem and a sense of belonging, the motivation and desire to successfully complete a high school diploma was minimal to none.

The gender makeup of the participants was three women and nine men with disabilities. Iachini et al. (2016) commented that the shift from middle school to high school is the most critical stage during a student's academic experience. Hence, as shown in Table 1, the majority of individuals with a disability dropped out in their 10th-grade year. Gottfried (2014) and Marchbanks et al. (2015) also reported that the ninth-grade year is the most crucial grade level in the area of dropout prevention. I conducted an analysis of the results from the research of McKee and Caldarella (2016) who also stated that by ninth grade, students who continued to be academically challenged would have a 75% probability of leaving school prematurely.

In the results of the analysis of RQ1, I found that participants' decision to drop out due to family reasons aligned with the assertions of Schargel and Smink (2014), and further, their realization that a high school equivalency diploma was critical to a successful future, was also common in the literature of McConnell and Kubina (2014). Participants needed to receive basic needs of physiological, safety and love from family before motivation develop. Pelletier et al. (1999) proposed that environmental motivation occurs for four different classes of reasons: strategy beliefs, ability beliefs, effort beliefs, and helplessness beliefs. That is, individuals may experience an absence of motivation to perform environmentally friendly behaviors because of the belief that ecological behaviors (e.g., recycling) are ineffective in producing the desired outcome, the belief that they do not have the personal ability to enact the required task, the belief that they

cannot maintain the effort that is required by the behavior, or, finally, the belief that they are simply powerless in effectuating a suitable outcome.

Utilizing a conceptual framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, I examined participants' personal high school experiences in an effort to understand factors leading to participants' choice to drop out. Maslow's theory suggests that only when students' needs are met (such as belonging and safety) can they exhibit improvement in academic success. Further, Maslow's theory supports the idea that if these needs are not being fulfilled in homes, then they can be fulfilled in schools where a positive school culture is apparent.

Through the voices of participants, emergent themes developed. These included: lack of motivation, lack of family support, low peer relationships, and behavioural issues. In RQ1 I asked what elements of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs did SWLDs who dropped out identified as contributing to dropping out of high school. According to Maslow, this need must be met to achieve a sense of self-worth. Therefore, emotional relationships drive human behavior.

In RQ2 I examined whether the missing elements within the Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs might have prevented the participants' decision to drop out. The missing element within Maslow's hierarchy of needs that prevented the participants' decision from dropping out of school was Maslow's theory of self-actualization. The participants' responses revealed that over 90% of the participants identified they had growth needs. Despite the recognition that there was a need to attain personal and academic growth, only 50% perceived themselves as having potential to engage in self-actualization strategies to become successful in school or work settings.

Practical Recommendations and Dissemination

Examining underlying themes relative to SWLDs' choice to drop out before obtaining a high school diploma may lead to reviewing and re-designing effective intervention and supports for positive SWLD student outcomes. The findings from this study may be shared with high school teachers and administrators to provide more teacher-student focused programs for SWLDs, heighten school awareness to address family support, or a lack thereof, and address peer ridicule and peer pressure relative to inappropriate student behaviour, drug use, and lack of motivation.

Having a better understanding of factors that contribute to student dropout rates may also provide insight into dropout rates of at-risk students other than that of SWLDs. Based on the voices of SWLD participants, implementation of intervention educational programs which may be successful in keeping the SWLDs engaged may requires a team approach of a special education teacher, general education teacher, an administrator, parent and guidance counsellor. Home visits may assist administrators in addressing participants' lack of family support concerns, as well as result in appropriate resource recommendations for SWLDs' family financial needs.

Participants indicated that lacking employable skills was a negative result from dropping out. To this end, on-the-job training with the collaboration of outside agencies may be an appropriate recommendation to assist SWLDs' career and vocational interests. Further, participation in an on-the-job program may facilitate increased SWLDs' motivation, self-esteem, and high school completion.

Implications of Social Change

Social change related to the dropout problem among at-risk SWLDs cannot occur until the leadership of schools addresses today's current issues and accepts these SWLDs as they are, to include the impact of the changes that they have dealt with through life experiences, outlooks, and perspective of education. Balancing everyday life choices is troubling for SWLDs. School administration and community members need to develop courses that could better serve our SWLDs. The reasons why SWLDs drop out of school at such a high rate is relevant to social change because understanding and addressing the needs and interests of our students related to this phenomenon could lead to more educated, productive citizens who make positive contributions to society.

All schools' missions are to not only increase graduation rates for students with and without disabilities but also prepare these students to meet college and career readiness standards. It is important to recognize that it takes more effort to earn good grades for SWLD. They must work even harder than the average student to do well in school. Schools can make small changes to help students with learning challenges become more successful. The reasons why SWLDs drop out of school at such an increasing rate is relevant to social change because understanding and addressing the issues related to this occurrence could lead to more educated, productive citizens who could make positive contributions to society. In this research study I did not address grade retention, yet it should be analyzed as an indicator for dropping out. It is necessary to how SWLDs perceive what's around them and how it impacts of the social encumbrances in their lives. The research study reveals that it is imperative to have a healthier relationship with teachers and administrators in order to succeed in the

classroom. According to the data obtained in this research study, teacher attitudes and lack of concern for SWLDs amplifies feelings of inadequacy which contributes to the A disconnection from the educational system.

For SWLDs to lead fruitful lives, they must obtain a high school credential. School and community prevention programs are aimed in decreasing the dropout rate is necessary prevent at-risk students from making the decision to drop out. The themes that emerged from this research study provided insight into the dropout issue among this disadvantaged group and also provided a rationale for teachers, administrators, and community leaders to focus the implementation of changes within the educational system in order to increase school awareness to SWLDs that could hopefully lead to the success of a graduation credential. To adopt social change the following suggestions are recommended:

1. Teachers and school leaders should collaborate to decrease out of school suspension by implementing a basic child study team (BCST) that would address alternatives to suspension. Though it is established in the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is not being used consistently.
2. Community leaders should create after school programs such as Career Academy that would cater specifically to at-risk SWLDs that would:
 - Increase graduation rates of students with IEP's,
 - Decrease drop-out rates of students with IEP's,
 - Decrease suspension and expulsion rates of students with IEP's for more than 10 days in a school year,

- Improve transition services that will enable students with IEP's to meet their post-school goals.
3. Teach transitional life skills courses to increase their chances to become successful adults.
 4. Create attractive career and technical education class in which SWLDs can enroll.

The findings from the research study indicated that not only was the dropout problem limited to school experiences but was also upon external factors beyond the school system. We must be vigilant on what led to the dropout problem among SWLDs to address the growing epidemic. The following recommendations are presented to assist at-risk SWLDs:

For Teachers:

1. Sensitivity training for teachers and administrators should be implemented that effectively address the social, emotional, academic learning and economic issues facing SWLDs in today's societies.
2. Collaborative team building with teachers working together for SWLDs on providing more individualized opportunities for at-risk students to receive academic assistance in learning.

For Students:

3. An effective disciplinary plan created for SWLDs that are not limited to out of school suspensions.
4. Guidance counseling should be mandatory for SWLDs that are at-risk for dropping out.

5. Peer mentoring for incoming 9th graders of SWLDs
6. Career and technical education programs should be implemented from the 9th grade
7. School size should be lessened to fifteen students per class to receive individual services.
8. Seek outside assistance from community stakeholders, such as Department Labor and Department of Human Services Vocational Rehabilitation Agency on the implementation of on-the-job-training program.
9. Implement into the curriculum a life skills course to address the social aspect when transitioning to adult life.

Recommendations for Dissemination

The research study was introduced because of the growing dropout epidemic nationwide. However, the dropout problem is not solely on the mainland, yet it is also prominent in the USVI particularly on St. Croix. Hence this research study was done to examine high school experiences of SWLDs who dropped out and did not attain a high school diploma or credential in St. Croix.

Upon approval from STX school superintendent, data collection results and analysis will be presented to both districts to make them aware of the perceptions that SWLDs have faced while attending school. To disseminate this study result, professional development opportunities with a focus on contributing factors to high school dropouts are recommended. Professional development sessions for the prevention of student dropouts may also be appropriate when providing within formats of new teacher orientations, teacher and administrator in-service trainings, and superintendent and board

meetings. Further, to reach a larger community apart from the school system, open forums such as churches, non-profit family service-oriented organizations may also benefit from the dissemination of this study results. Also the findings of this research study should be shared at the professional leadership conferences such as TEACH (Together Educating America's Children), principal's leadership conferences (Association for Supervision and Curriculum and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Conference on Teaching Excellence, National Principals Conference) and guidance counseling seminars that are held territorial as well as nationwide.

Recommendation for Further Study

More research is necessary to examine the additional factors that affect the dropout rate among SWLDs. Although the results of this research provided insight as to the experiences of dropout SWLDs, yet the following are recommendations for further study: (a) examining students identified as being at-risk of dropping out from early, (b) a comparison study of similarities in disabilities that contribute to dropout decisions, (c) teacher's perception specific to underlying cause of SWLD drop outs, and (d) exploration of the psychological impact of SWLDs post dropping out of school.

Conclusion

Dropping out of high school is a choice that severely impacts a student's chances for subsequent educational and occupational opportunities (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Misjudgement, misunderstanding, and a lack of guidance often lead SWLDs to the decision to drop out. Transitioning to high school is one of the most critical stages during an SWLD's academic career (Kennedy, 2017). Dropping out is the result of a long

process of disengagement and alienation, preceded by less severe types of withdrawal such as truancy and course failures (Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017).

Students with learning disabilities often have a more difficult time than their nondisabled peers in completing high school graduation requirements. Each year the State Office of the Special Education Programs reports on the increase of dropout SWLDs. Those SWLDs who fail to complete high school could face serious implications regarding social stability and economic growth (Nworie, 2016). In this chapter recommendations to disseminate data themes were discussed and potential areas for further study were presented. This qualitative case study's results examined underlying factors contributing to SWLDs' dropout rate in USVI STX. Participants' high school experiences were examined utilizing the conceptual framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in an effort to better understand what impacts a SWLDs' decision to drop out. School staff, administrators, community leaders and stakeholders have the power to bring social change to the schools. Hence, stakeholders and community members may benefit by understanding underlying cause for increasing high school dropout rates in STX, and therefore, revise education and community intervention strategies.

In this qualitative study, I utilized a case study research in order to present an in-depth look at the experiences of SWLDs' who attended high school in STX.

Trustworthiness and credibility were essential as the foundation of this qualitative study to collect authentic data and also an essential piece to decide whether the data was accurate and if it fully represented the reality of participants' thoughts. To establish the credibility of the study, member checking was used as a technique to provide an opportunity for participants to verify my interpretation of participant's responses. The

invitation to participate in member checking was provided either through email, phone conversation, or face-to-face contact. Using the above measure of credibility ensure that the data conveyed was true and credible.

Researcher bias, as well as misinterpretations of data and participant responses, did not affect the results of this study due to its qualitative nature. My role as the researcher was not a limitation due to my previous experiences as a special education high school supervisor. Though these limitations and researcher bias was not the case, I did though ensure that the participant responses were counter checked by using member checking to establish credibility. Hence, these actions decrease the probability of prejudice in this research study.

By framing the research questions around Maslow's hierarchy of needs, data outcomes were in the form of four emerging themes as underlying contributors to SWLDs dropping out of high school. These themes were (a) lack of teacher and family support, (b) lack of family support, (c) peer and adult ridicule, and (d) peer pressure and behavioral concerns. Within these themes emerged common elements reported by SWLDs as secondary to primary contributing factors to include low self-esteem, lack of motivation to perform in school, financial need, unexpected teen pregnancy, and student substance abuse. If stakeholders and community agencies can provide strategies to increase SWLDs' self-esteem while in school and increase a holistic approach of integrating community resources, dropout rates of SWLDs may decrease in STX schools.

Maslow's theory offers a quality framework for assessing factors that contribute with dropout SWLDs. In his theoretical approach, Maslow (1943) identified that man is not motivated by rewards or desires, but instead by any one situation when basic needs

are met. Further, Maslow purported that his theory accounted for the condition that if needs were not being fulfilled in homes, then they could be fulfilled in schools where a positive school culture is apparent. Maslow's (1943) theory, when applied to SWLDs in the school setting, was constructive in identifying missing basic needs necessary for SWLDs to become successful. Examining how administrators and teachers can facilitate strategies to satisfy each level of Maslow's needs is apparent based on this study's results. Information gathered from the research study provided key insights relative to SWLDs' high school experiences, facilitating social change, and increasing school success for SWLDs.

Through the lens of SWLD's voices the intent of the qualitative research study was to examine the high dropout rate among SWLDs on STX. The guiding research question for this study was also recognize:

RQ 1. How did the deficiency of Maslow's self-esteem needs, impact SWLDs decision to drop out of high school?

RQ 2. What missing elements within the Maslow's hierarchy of needs if put in place, might have prevented SWLDs from dropping out of high school?

Through the literature review, high dropout rates pose a problem not only for school systems, but for the communities in which dropouts live. Nevertheless, individuals with learning disabilities outnumber those without disabilities by 3 to 1 in our jails (Sinclair et al., 2017). According to Southward and Kyzar (2017), dropouts not only experience negative consequences leading up to dropping out of school but the effects of dropping out also follow them throughout the rest of their lives. Based on the findings in the research study, participants stated in the interviews that dropping out of school impacted

their livelihood of living, based on lack of employment, family failures, socioeconomic status, and behavioural issues. The outcomes of this study have added to the current literature concerning dropout SWLDs.

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Appendix A. In-Depth Interview Guiding Questions

1. Did your parent(s) receive a high school diploma?
2. Do you remember what grade you drop out of high school?
3. How old are you now?
4. Can you remember what disability was identified on your Individual Education Plan (IEP)? What is it?
5. What family issues, if any, contributed to your decision to drop out?
6. What do you think the administrators and the special education teachers at the school could have done in order to keep you motivated and therefore remain in school?
7. Have you attempted to earn a high school diploma or GED?
8. Describe your peers and adult relationship being a high school student.
9. Describe your self-esteem throughout your high school experiences.
10. Did you participate in any extracurricular activities at school such as sports or student clubs? If yes, describe your self-esteem during your extra curriculum activity.
11. Rate the factors from least to greatest of reasons on your decision to drop out?
12. Do you feel that you achieve your full potential prior to choosing to dropout?
13. What impact has dropping out have on you now?
14. What impact has dropping out has on your family?