

An Evidentiary-Based Assessment of the Dropout Rate among African American Males in North
Florida

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Abstract

According to a study named “The Urgency of Now” released by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, only 52% of African American males who are ninth-graders, actually graduate from high school after four years in United States. This number is very low when compared to other ethnic groups such as 58% for Latino and 78% for whites respectively.

In this paper, I will explore the reasons behind such as trend. There can be various reasons such as social norms, personal reasons, and economic reasons. The paper will explore all the settings and analyze what contributes to such a high drop-out rate of African American males. I will especially focus on this prevalent situation among African American school going males in the state of Florida.

The study is important to identify the specific reasons behind such a high drop-out rate and work on the focused solution in this area. The African American population in United States constitutes 12.6% of the total population, second largest after the 72.4% of white or European American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The African American population in Florida constitutes 12.6% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Education is considered to be the basic requirement of any state or country and thus drop-out rates in the field of education is needed for the overall advancement of the nation and the state. These young students are the future and thus the study is essential to understand the various circumstances which lead to the drop-out of African American males and work towards its solution. When not properly guided and educated, most of the students take to crime and end up in juvenile prisons. Thus, it becomes all the more important to work towards solving this problem.

Introduction

Education has always been considered as the key to a golden future of any country. The economic and social growth of society and a nation at large is dependent on the quality education being provided to the children and younger generation of the nation. Higher Education is essential for acquiring specialized skill sets and growth in the society. This is true for United States also. According to a study named “The Urgency of Now” released by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, only 52% of African American males who are ninth-graders, actually graduate from high school after four years in United States. This number is very low when compared to other ethnic groups such as 58% for Latino and 78% for whites respectively.

The various reasons cited by the study are:

- ❖ The “push out” which describes that African American male students are disciplined in schools in a disproportionate manner such as out-of-school suspensions. This results in the decrease in learning time of these students and forces them out of the educational system.
- ❖ The “lock out” which describes that African American male students are discriminated from other students. The discrimination is evident from the fact that they are not allowed to access the high quality resources such as educational infrastructural facilities and highly-trained teachers.

The problem of drop outs is common in the state of Florida as well. With 49% of the high schools operating in Florida and supporting less than 60% of the students in Florida; has made Florida come up on second ranking in term of prevalence of “drop out” (Balfanz & Leghters, 2008).

The estimates of drop outs at different levels in Florida are below the figure of national average. The various figures are:

- ❖ In 2006-07 Graduation Rate in Florida was only 72.4% (FLDOE, 2008)
- ❖ In 2006-07 the average Freshman Graduation Rate, NCES in Florida was barely 66.4% (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, and Stillwell, 2007)

According to a study by *Education Week, Children Trends Database, April, 2013*

- ❖ 75% of crimes being committed in U.S. are committed by a high school drop-out.
- ❖ 60% of black drop-outs spend time in prison annually
- ❖ The high school drop-outs are not eligible for 90% of United States jobs

According to Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), there has been found a variation in the drop-out rate by gender also. Males have a higher drop-out rate in 2007 (3.7%) than the females (2.9%) in Florida. Such high drop-out rates is a clear indicator that the students are not receiving welfare by the educational institutes and society. The various effects which drop-out has on the economic health are:

- ❖ Approximately \$2.7 billion of taxpayer's money in Florida was spent on prison system and still it was not enough (Warren, 2008).
- ❖ There is one man in every 30 men in prison in the age group of 20-34 years. The figure for black male in the same age group is one man out of every nine men (Warren, 2008)
- ❖ Approximately 55% of adult drop outs do not get employment in Florida (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008)

The reasons cited behind the drop-out of African American males are: behavioral issues, suspensions, low grades, and poor attendance (FLDOE, 2012). The drop-out rate of African American males in Northern Florida is approximately 75% (3 out of every 4 black males) (Schott

Foundations for Public Education, 2010). There have been a continuous debate on the method of calculation of drop-out rate in Northern Florida; nevertheless, the concern for high drop-out rate still exists.

The African American students limit their potential and opportunity for future success by dropping out of high school. The risk of dropping out of high school is increased when the African American males find it difficult to adjust to the environment of the schools. The black students are treated disproportionately by the school authorities such as teachers while enacting exclusionary disciplinary actions against them such as suspensions, expulsions, and alternative schools. The black students are likely to receive 2.6 times more suspensions than white students (Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, December, 2010). Thus, they are placed at a higher risk of dropping out.

The schools are increasingly using the policy of “zero-tolerance” where there is a pre-determined punishment to discipline students regardless of the extenuating circumstances. These policies instead of increasing the school discipline are contributing to: negative school climate; increasing the drop-out rate; and alienating the students who actually need school interventions. Even after 50 years of stand that Brown Public School took to remain segregated, more than 70% of African American and Latino students are attending schools that are over 50% minority (Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, December, 2010). The percentage of total out-of-school referrals an African American male received in Northern Florida was 71.82% and 73.14% in the year 2008 and 2010 respectively. The figure for whites was 20.36% and 19.50% respectively (Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, December, 2010).

This factor suggests that there are problems in schools with disciplinary actions in relationship to race and gender. It was also reported in northern Florida that in terms of ethnic groupings, African American male students were represented at a higher referral rate for special education programs and alternative education programs as compared to any other ethnic groupings (Florida Department of Education, 2010). The United States Commission on Civil Rights (2010) reported that in northern Florida, 72% of students who received out-of-school suspensions were African American, while only 20% of the out-of-school suspensions were white students according to the data obtained in 2009; and the rest of 8% consisted of Latinos, Asian Americans, and other races. Multiple disciplinary referrals, school suspensions, and poor academic performance in the classroom often lead African American males to develop low self-esteem and low values of self-worth (Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, 2011). These students begin to disconnect with the learning process and therefore develop a poor perception of the educational process. Due to repetitive disciplinary actions and suspensions, 47% of the African American male students in Florida dropped out (Florida Department of Education, 2010). The failure of African American males to complete high school threatens the future productivity of society and the communities in which they live. When statistics show a higher number of dropouts among African-American male students as compared to their Caucasian counterparts, educators and policy makers must find solutions that would aid in decreasing these numbers. School administrators, teachers, and counselors also greatly impact the decision of African American males choosing to drop out of school (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008; Bell, 2009; Bell, 2010). Lack of cultural understanding and programs that meet the needs of these students are also contributing factors to this high dropout rate. The significant gap in the graduation rate among African American males and other ethnic groups is cause for alarm and troubling in an

American society that emphasizes the importance of education and academic achievement in order to become successful in life.

African American males are often misunderstood and lack the social skills to effectively communicate with their teachers or administrators. There is disconnect between African American males and teachers or administrators may be due to a lack of understanding because social barriers and social inequalities. African American males have been found to be misguided repeatedly and thus suffer mental breakdown by people who lack the capabilities and dispositions to effectively work with them in our nation's classroom (Bell, 2010; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).

Acts of exclusionary practices lead African American males to develop a sense of disengagement and create a negative perception of the educational system (Gregory and Thompson, 2010; Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, 2011). Further research studies have also added that African American males who get frequent suspensions or those who get expelled usually develop attitudes of academic disengagement, increased association with various rebellious peers, develop resentment of their school authority, and finally experience a sense of being alienated (Watson, 2010). These factors all play a significant role in the lives of African American male students and lead them to dropping out of school. Other issues such as familial dynamics, peer influences, and cultural values also play a role in accelerating the dropout rate among African American males, but these factors are beyond the control of the educational system.

Each year school districts throughout the state of Florida have reported a dropout problem among African American males. The Florida Department of Education (2010) defines a dropout as "a student who withdraws from school for any of several reasons without transferring

to another school, home education program, or adult education program” (p.5). The high rate of failure of African American males to complete high school create many problems and risks for their future such as, lower paying jobs and potential incarceration. Watson (2010) emphasized that African American male students have to be encouraged to finish their high school studies in order for their hopes to be raised and for them to experience any chance of a normal productive life. In Section two, much more on the reasons for these dropouts will be discussed.

Problem Statement

The high drop-out rates among African American male students has found the root cause in the educational system and the disproportionate punishment meted out to blacks in the schools, especially in Florida. That problem, specifically, is that 52% of African American males are failing to graduate from high school in United States; and this number is higher in Florida at state level which is approximately 75%. Currently federal legislation such as the “No Child Left Behind Act”, school reforms, rigorous curriculums, and highly qualified teachers have failed to decrease the dropout rate among African American males (Center for improvement of Student Learning, 2008). There are many possible factors contributing to the high dropout rate among African American males such as poverty, socio-economics, family, peers, and educational practices. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address the local problem by careful examination of the African American male school experience.

Nature of the Study

The proposed study will be conducted with African American male students who have dropped out of school in northern Florida. The study will rely on two types of data: primary data and secondary data.

The primary data will be gathered by conducting interviews of African American male students in the schools operating in Northern Florida. The participants will be adults who dropped out of school in northern Florida without receiving a high school credential. These participants will be selected through purposive sampling. The interviews will be conducted in following manner:

- ❖ Face-to-face interviews with the African American male students who can be reached at nearby schools.
- ❖ Telephonic interviews with the African American male students who are located in schools at farther location in Northern Florida and the face-to-face interview is not possible.
- ❖ The face-to-face interviews will be conducted during school hours in lunch break and free periods. The telephonic interviews will be conducted after school hours so that the students can be reached at their home and are comfortable sharing their feedback.
- ❖ All the interviews including face-to-face and telephonic interviews will be audio tapped.

The narrative inquiry will focus on each individual's experience in order to identify the factors responsible for their drop out from high school.

The secondary data will be gathered from: the university library, online library of different universities in United States, the data of FLDOE and other governmental institutes working in the field of education, previous researches conducted by various scholars.

Research Questions

The following research questions will lead to understanding the dropout problem for alternative schools in North Florida:

1. What social, cultural, educational and economic factors contribute to African American male students dropping out of school?
2. What role did the school environment play in influencing African American males to make the choice to drop out of school?
3. Are there common risk factors that can be identified among these students that dropped out?

These questions will help to guide this research and provide researchers with valuable information in order to address the dropout problem in North Florida alternative schools. A more detailed explanation of this study will be presented in section three, Methodology.

Purpose Statement

The primary focus of the research is to identify the factors behind the high drop-out rate of African American males in Florida by using the tools of primary and secondary research. In order to identify the root causes, I will investigate the different experiences that the African American male students get while studying in schools. The study will be qualitative in nature with the main focus on the experiences and influences of African American males in northern Florida that lead them to the decision to drop out. The findings of the study will be useful to the teachers, educational stakeholders and community leaders.

Theoretical Framework

The proposed study will be based on a theoretical framework of constructivism. According to Creswell (2009), the constructivist approach seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views gathered from the participants. The constructivism theory, proposed by Piaget, viewed the learner as an active participant in the learning process through interactions with the learning environment individually or with others; with learning resulting from the

“construction and qualitative reorganization of knowledge structures” (Packer & Giocoechea, 2000, p. 228).

The theoretical framework under Constructivist Theory will constitute of the following ideas (McKinley, 2005):

- ❖ The instructions provided to the African American male students should be effective and the students should culturally response to it
- ❖ The teachers should establish positive and effective interpersonal relationship with the African American male students and this should be based on the social constructivist aspects of teaching
- ❖ There should be cultural congruence in accordance with the African American male students
- ❖ The African American male students should be motivated to complete their education. This motivation should be provided by the teachers with positive attitude towards them without any malign of racial discrimination.
- ❖ Social activism should address racism, social and personal conditions of African American students, disparate expectations, and opportunities to learn.

Constructivist theory, at its heart, views the learner as having a complex set of referents and meanings to which the learner relates new items in order to create knowledge during learning (Cobern, 2012). In addition, the constructivist theory has a special view on the student in that students can construct personally meaningful knowledge. Therefore, the focus in learning, under the constructivist approach, should be heavily on the student (Cobern, 2012). The constructivist theory states that learning should be the students’ responsibility and social interactions within the classroom environment are critical to the learning process in order for the

student to be successful (Cooper, 2010). In constructivists learning situations, students' learning results from the ideas they construct during their interactions with any material or event that encompasses their learning experiences.

Definition of Terms

Terms used throughout this study are defined as follows:

African American Students. Students of African descent born in the United States of America are commonly known as African American students (Holzman, 2008).

Zero-Tolerance. "zero-tolerance" is the situation where there is a pre-determined punishment to discipline students regardless of the extenuating circumstances

No Child Left Behind Act. The act was proposed in 2001 by the President George W. Bush and became a law on January 8, 2002. Under the provisions of this act, all the public schools which are receiving funds from the federal government are required to administer a standardized test at state-level every year for all the students without any discrimination.

Alternative Education. According to Fox (2009), alternative education is designed to meet the needs of at-risk students who are not succeeding in the traditional setting. Students are provided with a variety of options that can lead to graduation and are supported by services for the student and their immediate family that are essential to their education success. This alternative education has ensured that the students who fail to make it within the traditional educational environment could be accommodated to finish their education are within their structure and environment.

Dropout. The Florida Department of Education (2012) defined a dropout as "a student who withdraws from school for any of several reasons without transferring to another school, home education program, or adult education program" (p.5).

Graduates. A graduate is a student who completes all the high school requirements in order to receive a high school diploma. (Civil Rights Florida Advisory Committee, 2010).

Public schools. In United States, public schools refer to the educational institutes or schools that are paid from taxes and provide free education to local children between the age of five and 18 years.

Traditional school. Any public school that offers a conventional education and adheres to the policies of the state department of education is known as traditional school (Florida Department of Education, 2010).

Assumptions

The data collection process will be based on certain assumptions such as:

- ❖ The participants in the study would agree to provide their opinions openly and honestly.
- ❖ The quality of the data collected will be rated based on the assumption that the data collected will be purely truthful and giving a real representation of the happenings in the alternative school program environment.
- ❖ It is also assumed that the researcher will make deliberate efforts to conduct the research in an unbiased fashion.
- ❖ A final assumption will be based on the fact that none of the respondents during the data collection would have been forced into giving the research team any false information.

Limitations

The study will be conducted on a purposive sample of African American males who dropped out of alternative schools.

Also, the study will include the African American students currently studying in schools in ninth grade and their intention of continuing their education or dropping out and the reasons behind their thought process.

The findings will be true to the studied sample, and hence generalization to other students that have dropped out of alternative schools will be limited. This study will rely on the memory of the participants who dropped out of the alternative school program several years ago. As a result, the students may be unable to accurately remember some of their experiences that they had in school that contributed to them choosing to drop out of school. Conducting the research on the basis of the quality of the data sought and the solutions expected about the problem at hand, the research work will use the qualitative research design.

Researcher bias and misinterpretations of data and participant responses may also affect the results of this study. The researcher's role may also be a limitation due to the fact that I will need to eliminate my opinion and experiences as an alternative school educator. In order to resolve these limitations and researcher bias, the researcher will ensure that the data is counter checked by other independent parties for better interpretations. With such attempts, the study will ensure that there is reduction in the level of biasness that could be reported if not counter checked.

Delimitations

This research paper is intended to study the experiences of African American male students who have dropped out of alternative schools. The research paper does not intend to study the experiences of students who dropped out of traditional school programs. The proposed study will examine the alternative school experiences of African American male students who dropped out one of the two alternative schools in northern Florida. It is not the intention of this study to provide generalized findings. It is expected that the information obtained will shed light on the factors that led the participants of the study group to drop out of alternative schools.

Significance of the Study

Over the past several years, national attention has been given to the high school dropout rate in the United States. According to the Florida Department of Education, (2011) almost one-third of public high school students fail to graduate from high school. The alternative school is often the last resort for many students. The dropout rate in alternative schools is important because these schools are supposed to be constructed for dropout prevention (ACLU, 2009; Florida Department of Education, 2012). Through this study analysis, I will try to identify the various reasons in the educational and social setting of the African American male students which lead them to drop-out from high school.

It would be important to verify the findings of Bost and Riccomini (2006) that early school failure begins the downward cycle leading children to question their competence, to lose self-esteem, to weaken their attachment to school, and inevitably, to drop out of school in later years.

This research will be valuable to educators and district leaders who are responsible for formulating plans and implementing programs to decrease the high dropout rate experienced in

alternative programs. This study's analysis will be used to promote social changes that will give educators insight to how the at-risk student, particularly African American males, perceive the school environment and thereby helping them to develop better program curricula. This study's analysis should also be used to help African American male students who are at risk of dropping out of schools to evaluate some factors that are driving them to think of dropping out of the schools and the measures that could be taken to avert this risk.

The findings of this research will be shared with alternative school personnel in northern Florida to increase communication into this problem and provide them with an insight into the alternative school experience from the at-risk student's perspective. This research may also be helpful in leading the faculty and administration in understanding why students in alternative schools drop out so that programs can be developed to prevent this occurrence.

Summary

Alternative schools are not meeting their intended goal when it comes to assisting African American males in completing high school (Franklin et al, 2007). Due to the fact that alternative school dropout rates have not been singled out in the past, the problem has not been closely observed. This research will determine some of the factors that are involved when African American male students choose to drop out before completing high school and therefore obtaining a high school diploma. These factors will be shared with teachers and administrators in order to create interventions to assist African American male students who attend alternative schools.

The intended outcome is to provide stakeholders and policy makers with information and insight into the dropout problem and provide information from the experiences and perspectives of this at-risk group in the alternative school environment. It is understood that dropping out is a

complex problem that can affect individuals for the rest of their life and therefore a great deal of attention needs to be paid to the subject matter. Since the continuity of society relies on the productiveness of youth, the lack of educated, productive African American males will have long term lasting effects in the future.

Section 2 will include a literature review that will examine many factors relating to the school environment within alternative schools and finally look at the reasons for the high dropout rate of African American males in northern Florida.

Section 3 will include the research methods used in the study. This section will also discuss the context for the study, how participants will be selected, and data analysis, the process that is intended to be used for the data and how data will be tracked.

In Section 4, the findings of this data, the results, and how the study shows evidence of quality will be discussed. In the last chapter, the research study will present a summary and conclusion, recommendations and an interpretation of the findings that the researcher hopes to discover.

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