RESEARCH ARTICLE

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES AMONG MINORITY POPULATIONS IN UNITED STATES

Mon Yonna BRAXTON[1], Benjamin DAMOAH[2]

[1] School of Education, The University of Southern Mississippi, United States, MonYonna.Braxton@usm.edu
[2] School of Biological, Environmental, and Earth Sciences, Department of Geography and Geology, The University of Southern Mississippi, United States
Benjamin.Damoah@usm.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9204-3395
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Abstract

The issue of high school dropout rate is a growing concern largely affecting 'brown skin' or minority individuals in the United States. In addition to studies indicating the negative outcomes associated with high school dropouts, research is needed to better understand contributing factors and policies effective for preventing high school dropouts. The purpose of this study is to examine the primary reasons students become less engaged in education resulting in increased high school dropouts, collect data that report variables associated with student dropout among minority individuals, and provide policies or program initiatives that are effective in reducing dropout rates. An in-depth quantitative study was conducted using a survey method to assess and understand reasons for high school dropout rates among 'brown skin' individuals. Specifically, a total of 17 respondents consisting of high school administrators and educators consented and submitted the questionnaire. Findings suggested that students' motivation for determining dropping out or retention was contingent on familial involvement, community resources, enacted school programs or activities, and established policies in further supporting student development in and outside the classroom. Further research could outline community-based partnerships for the intended school that configure job placement, literacy courses, familial involvement, and services.

Keywords: *African American/Black students*, *United States, high school, dropout, minority*, *Hispanic/Latino students*

1 Introduction

In the United States, the high school dropout rate rose steadily in the early 2000s (McNeil et al., 2008) and continues to be a prevalent issue, with approximately 536,000 students dropping out between October 2016 to October 2017 (McFarland et al., 2019). In the state of Mississippi specifically, approximately 9.7 % of students have dropped out (Vanderford, 2020). Dropping out of high school disproportionately impacts minority youth (Marquez et al., 2007). Specifically, minority youth experience tragedies in their life that stem from being at a socio-economic disadvantage, having poor teacher-student relationships, and additional familial challenges (Jordan & Lara, 1996; Miller, 2019; Rumberger, 2013; Sahin et al., 2016). Dropping out of high school has numerous impacts on not only the individual but society as well; specifically, high school dropouts face hardships in areas of job placement and employment which results in lower economic resources (Miller, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to identify the primary causes of high school dropout rates, especially among minority students, to increase student engagement and improve retention rates.

Major themes emerged from the literature as to variables affecting student motivation regarding high school dropout. Student's beliefs and attitudes play a vital role in their overall academic success (Fan & Wolters, 2014). Among the lack of student motivation, socioeconomic concern, familial dynamics, and estranged teacher–student relationships were noted as determinants of increased student dropout rates (Miller, 2019; Newscomb et al., 2002; Sahin et al., 2016). Student dropouts have a negative connotation to society at large with the majority of individuals experiencing a lack of employment opportunities, poorer health concerns, and an increased criminal record resulting in delayed development with students (Miller, 2019; Newscomb et al., 2002; Sahin et al., 2016). However, studies indicate that students' decisions to high school dropout were largely in conjunction with several factors as noted.

Among Hispanic, Black, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, high dropout rates affect marginalized individuals at a rate of 41.5%, compared to their white peers at 7.3% (Kaufman. Et al., 2004). The inequalities in education impact persons for reasons of expulsion, childcare needs, and/ or incarceration (Jordan & Lara, 1996; Miller, 2019; Rumberger, 2013; Sahin et al., 2016). Further barriers have affected the overall success beyond the institution of education. The intersections of gender constructs also affect students of color as relate to educational endeavors. Specifically, black females are forced to drop out of high school because of school suspensions and family responsibilities such as becoming the primary caretaker of siblings or family members.

The quality of education is correlated to the emphasis placed on academic excellence and the resources available to students (Sahin et al., 2016; Damoah & Omodan, 2022).According to Sahin and colleagues (2016), school dropout is defined as the failure to complete the current education that the person is enrolled in due to several factors. Approximately 1.3 million students each year from both minority and majority populations within the United States fail to complete high school academia (Henry et al., 2010). In the state of Mississippi alone, there are approximately 3,291 (9.7%) students out of 33,936 who failed to complete high school in the year 2020 (Vanderford, 2020). This issue continues to be ongoing in prevalence and determining the most effective programs for addressing these concerns will save money and produce better academic outcomes and life trajectories for youth in the state of Mississippi. To effectively address the issues raised in this study, we have outlined a set of research questions that will serve as our guiding principles.

2 Research Questions
- What are some reasons students decide dropping out is an option?
- Are there policies or programs established to prevent students from dropping out?
- How may the community or school system become involved to keep students engaged while meeting the student's needs?

3 Methods
This quantitative study is hinged on the survey method which employed a questionnaire instrument to collect data. The sample included 17 participants consisting of administrators, educators, and those affiliated with the educational system from one high school (n = 17) in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Participants were primarily White/Caucasian (82.35%; n = 14), Black/African American (11.76%; n = 2), and Hispanic/Latino (5.88%; n = 1).

Participants were recruited using an emailed standard letter[1] and consented to receive the Qualtrics survey via the Qualtrics platform. Only individuals who teach or assist in guiding students in grades 9th to 12th grade were eligible to participate. No other exclusion criteria were employed. Qualtrics survey link was distributed among school staff who teach or assist in guiding 9th to 12th grade students and participants then completed 15–20-minute questions. students and increasing the overall graduation rate. Participants will not be rewarded any compensation or incentive for completing the study. Information from the study will be used to promote awareness to the general public concerning student dropout rates.

Questions were categorized based on influential factors that motivate students' decision to drop out of high school. Categories consist of factors such as school-related reasons, family-related reasons, employment-related reasons, administrator/teacher-related reasons, health-related reasons, individual-related reasons, and other related reasons. Participants provided suggestive feedback regarding programs that are enacted at their specified schools along with the effectiveness of such programs. The study then explored related and relevant literature on the following themes: why is dropping out an issue, why are students dropping out, what is the prevalence of high school dropout rates among minority populations, and what current policies are aimed at reducing dropout rates. The study was submitted to the University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval before data collection.

4 Literature Review

4.1 Implications for High School Dropout

There are several benefits to completing high school. These benefits include higher academic success, increased standardized test scores, better graduation averages, and greater university entrance rates and job opportunities (Sahin et al., 2016). Positive outcomes emphasize the importance of student engagement and opportunities for students' involvement in school settings (Sahin et al., 2016). There are also negative outcomes for students who fail to complete high school such as an increase in drug and crime involvement and the exhibition of disruptive and aggressive behaviors (Newcomb et al., 2002). On an individual level, high school incompletion results in limited job opportunities and an increased potential for social and emotional problems when transitioning into adulthood (Sahin et al., 2016). Negative consequences of dropping out also have impacts on a national level due to the increase in economic cost to taxpayers, with approximately $292,000 allocated annually to prevent youth from dropping out of high school (Graduation Alliance, n.d.). Along with lost revenue, individuals who drop out are often on public assistance (Miller, 2019) which is also costly.

4.2 Causes for Student Dropout

The motivation behind why a student drops out of high school is variable and may be different from one student to another. However, determining these motivations may help facilitate targeted programs for reducing dropout rates among at-risk groups. Research suggests motivations behind the decision to drop out may stem from family matters, school/teacher attitudes, and student involvement (Sahin et al., 2016). A variety of factors encompass family matters. However, the focus here will be on parental investment and family socioeconomic status. In a study conducted by Henry and colleagues (2011), parent investment was determined to be a significant predictor of whether the child succeeds beyond the classroom environment. The authors suggest that parental involvement impacts the child's sense of self-worth which, in turn, can result in the child finishing and turning in schoolwork, testing well on exams, increasing positive behavior at school, and, ultimately, completing high school (Henry et al., 2011). In addition to parent investment, socioeconomic status is associated with motivations behind dropping out of high school with more students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds being more prone to dropping out of high school (Henry et al., 2011). This is of particular concern for students from minority backgrounds as there has historically been an economic disadvantage imparted on minority communities suggesting that students from these communities may be more at risk for dropping out and the subsequent negative consequences associated with dropping out (Henry et al., 2011). In addition, students who come from minority backgrounds have a mentality to perceive graduation as a lessened expectation (Henry et al., 2011).

Students' motivation may also be influenced by a variety of factors at school as well. Specifically, teacher-student relationships are highly influential and used as an instrument in determining whether the student will graduate high school (Doll et al., 2013). In a TedTalk addressed to school administrators and colleagues, former educator Rita Pierson (2013) expresses that to teach students, educators must be concerned and compassionate about their student's educational needs and personal development. Teachers play a significant role in human connection and ultimately assist students with understanding course materials, advocating for student needs/rights, and breaking barriers that assist students in general society. To engage youth, teachers, and administrators should embrace the students at their current state and propel them forward with resources that will facilitate success. For students to listen to teachers and engage in classroom activities, Marquez and colleagues (2007) suggest that teachers take the opportunity to know their students along to understand the everyday conditions that affect the students' lives.

In addition, the overall systems are just as important as teacher-student connections. School systems have a responsibility to ensure that students are engaged and supplied with the resources that are used to aid them with academic and personal problems (Damoah, Khalo & Omodan, 2023). Such things include organized groups (i.e., Effective Learnings Programs; Nowicki Jr. et al., 2004) along with community partnerships and policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Each opportunity provides support for the student and their family by encouraging them to continuously meet their educational needs to better them and create the opportunity to intervene when necessary in areas that are potentially outside of the student's control (Klein, 2015).

Individually, the student may face obstacles in their lives that are new and unfamiliar at this crucial life stage before adulthood. Specific experiences include teenage pregnancy, or impacted home environment displacement such as homelessness and even incarceration of parents (Jordan & Lara, 1996; Miller, 2019; Rumberger, 2013). This could be due to a variety of factors including environmental, genetic, or psychosocial influences. For example,

adolescents may experience stressful life events that impact their mental health and subsequent academic success such as parental divorce or the death of a loved one. Additionally, other students may have undiagnosed learning disorders that impact their learning and academic success. Others still may have a negative rapport with school administrators and teachers which could lead these school officials to stigmatize and discriminate against the student based on this negative rapport and preconceived notions (Sahin et al., 2016). Students who experience this stigma may be less likely to complete high school academics because of the discrimination received resulting in the student's discouragement of course materials and exclusion from beneficial resources. These various personal challenges that are experienced in the students' lives would discourage and prevent students from completing their high school courses because of the lack of support received from the students' confidants. Similarly, these tragedies would also interfere with students' motivations.

The motivation of the student also impacts the decision of student dropout rates (Newcomb et al., 2002). Relatively, chronic absenteeism plays a significant role in the student's decision-making (Miller, 2019). Students reported missing too many class hours and ultimately falling behind in study materials which results in academic failure (Jordan & Lara, 1996). Along with the consequences of not attending school, it is suggested that students with learning disabilities, whether known or unknown, are more prone to not completing high school academics (Sahin et al., 2016). There are a variety of reasons why disabilities may go undetected such as the lack of response-to-intervention (RTI) programs and the lack of school psychologists or other mental health professionals who can assess and treat individuals with learning disorders (Featherston III, 2010; Nowicki Jr. et al., 2004; Sahin et al., 2016). These often boil down to a lack of resources and services that are not provided for students who have an unknown disorder. Other factors of students' decline in high school include students' attitudes toward course content and a dislike for school (Sahin et al., 2016; Jordan & Lara, 1996). 51% of students critically expressed in a survey conducted by Jordan and Lara (1996) that they simply did not like school.

4.3 Prevalence of High School Dropout Rates among Minority Populations

Addressing high school dropout rates among minority communities includes data collection from McNeil (2008) which indicates that a large percentage of minority students drop out of high school – specifically, Hispanic/Latino students and African American/Black students. Current dropout rates for African American/Black youth (6%) and Latino/Hispanic youth (8.6%) are 1% to 3.6% higher, respectively, than Caucasian/White youth (5%; Miller, 2019). Some reasons that have been identified for why minority youth are impacted at greater rates include teen pregnancies, disadvantaged communities, and/or socioeconomic status (Miller, 2019). More specifically, minority groups lack in areas of receiving assistance in financial retribution and community organizations (Featherston III, 2010). In the state of Mississippi, the total number of African American/Black students who dropped out in 2020 totaled 1,870 (11.2%) and the total number of Hispanic/Latino students who dropped out was 136 (12.4%; Vanderford, 2020). If rates of minorities dropping out are compared to their White counterparts (*n*= 1,222; 8%) it reveals that minority students drop out of high school at a higher rate (1.2% and 4% respectively) as compared to White students (Vanderford, 2020). However, researchers are interested in the factors of this cause.

4.4 Minority Students

The American dream is often idolized from the perspective of many with the idea of one receiving a quality education in hopes of gaining respect and ultimately providing vast opportunities beyond the world of academia (Hill & Torres, 2010). However, for particular communities, this reality is unattainable (Henry et al., 2011). For individuals in the minority community, opportunities are limited because of limited financial resources and ignorance of available resources. Due to the unfortunate circumstances experienced by some groups of students, individuals are 2.4 times more likely to drop out of high school if their socioeconomics is low (Miller, 2019). In the study, the term "minority" will refer to individuals of non-European or Caucasian descent.

Motivations for minority students included an increase in the lack of available resources for students and their families. Notably, the poverty rates for African American/Black students and Latino/ Hispanic students are affected three times more than their White/Caucasian student counterparts (Rumberger, 2013). There are striking differences even among genders. Per Jordan and Lara's study (1996), African American and Hispanic males did not complete high school academics because of their school's lack of capacity and resources to handle their disruptive conduct. Such behaviors consisted of misinterpreted student responses that led to many sanctions given (Jordan & Lara, 1996); ultimately, this resulted in schools excluding students because of unacceptable behaviors displayed both knowingly and unknowingly. Similarly, research from Miller (2019) suggests that female students are chronically absent more often than their male peers (22% and 20.4%, respectively). Absenteeism may result because of the caring of family members or children, concerns with transportation issues, or conflicting work

schedules (Sahin et al., 2016).   There are also suggestions that students, particularly African-American females, were more likely to cite school suspension or expulsion as reasons for dropping out. The systematic issues include disadvantages in resources such as socioeconomic status, school funding, outdated course materials, and overworked teachers may play a role in why minority students are impacted at a greater risk for dropping out of high school. Understanding these characteristics will assist in student retention and completion while also encouraging the students to continue their education beyond high school.

4.5 Current Policies Aimed at Reducing Dropout Rates

Among the enacted programs aimed at reducing student dropout rates and meant to increase overall student success is the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law (Klein, 2015). The purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) was to advance American competitiveness and close the achievement gap between poor and minority students along with their more advantaged peers (Klein, 2015); funding was allocated to schools for approximately $230 million (Peyser & Costrell, 2006). Under the act, schools and students were required to meet the "proficient level" on state exams and were expected to reach the adequate yearly process goal (AYP; Klein, 2015). If schools missed the AYP goal, schools were subject to sanctions that included 1) allowing the student to transfer to a better performing public school in the same district, 2) offering free tutoring, or 3) facing state intervention including but not limited to the closure of the school, alternating it into a charter school, ownership to the government, or changing the school strategy (Klein, 2015). Regarding the students' performance under the No Child Left Behind Act, the accountability of the act being established assisted in helping students attain proficiency in areas of mathematics and increased general scoring in students from disproportionate backgrounds (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

The overall success of students is important to the nature of the school. To address the issue of student engagement and prevent the incompletion of high school academics, schools can assist in facilitating student success by implementing programs such as intentional mentoring, academic tutoring, and peer leadership courses (Featherston III, 2010; Nowicki Jr., 2004) along with community partnerships that would address the interest of the student. Outcomes of using these preventative measures would result in student completion of high school academics along with the improvement of behavioral challenges, interpersonal skills, and student engagement (Featherston III, 2010). Such programs are effective in mitigating the crisis of high school dropouts in America.

A continuous effort to meet students and their families where they are should be considered when interacting with minority students and their families. An expressed need for the development of more programs and community partnerships would also suffice to aid high school students. Program partnerships should consist of childcare facilities, parental involvement or employment courses, supplemental assistance, and/or health professional services. An example would include a scene from the film, "Lean on Me" (1989) in which Principal Joe Clark helps a student and her mother find supportive resources (seeking counseling services, job placement, and providing an adequate living environment) available to prevent the student from dropping out of high school. If programs catered to the needs of the student and their families, the future may see a potential increase in student engagement, a higher graduation rate, and a decline in high school failures.

5. Results and Discussion

Q1: What are some reasons students decide that dropping out is an option?
School–related reasons *(n=15; 26.79%),* family-related reasons *(n=15; 26.79%),* and employment-related reasons *(n=10; 17.86%)* were the top three contributing factors cited among teachers as to why students are dropping out.

Q2: Are there policies or programs established to prevent students from dropping out?
93.75% *(n=15)* of participants selected yes as to whether policies or programs were established to prevent students from dropping out while 6.25% *(n=1)* selected no. Tutoring services *(n=17; 26.98%),* Community Outreach/ Partnerships *(n=14;22.22%),* and Remedial Courses *(n=16;25.40%)* were most frequently noted as policies or programs implemented into the school setting to prevent students from dropping out of high school.

Q3: How may the community or school system become involved to keep students engaged while meeting the student's needs?
Based on respondents' comments, providing programs that engaged the students' interests or socio-cultural activities was suggested to be relevant for students' engagement and retention.

High school dropout rates are a prevalent issue among minority students because of the limited opportunities given to students of diverse backgrounds. The study is important for determining factors that influence student's decisions when dropping out of high school. Participants who were recruited for the proposed students were employees of one selected school in the Lamar County School District. Participants consisted of administrators *(11.76%; n=2)*, counselors *(11.76%; n=2),* educators *(58.82%; n=10)*, and other employees *(17.65%; n=3)*. The demographics of participants guiding minority students included White/Caucasian (82.35%; *n=14*); Black/African American *(11.76%; n=2)*, and Hispanic/Latino (5.88 %; n=*1)*. Based on respondents' feedback and how the survey was designed, the absence of administration/teacher-related influences in determining students' decision to drop out was often negated.

The feedback from respondents has revealed that the most significant factors contributing to high school dropouts are related to school, family, and employment. Specifically, school-related factors may include academic struggles, difficulty adjusting to a new school environment, or a lack of support from educators and peers (Jordan & Lara, 1996; Miller, 2019; Rumberger, 2013; Sahin et al., 2016). Family-related factors may involve issues such as financial instability, a lack of parental involvement, or family crises that interfere with a student's ability to focus on their education. Employment-related factors may include the need to work to support themselves or their families, or a lack of flexibility in their work schedule to accommodate their academic responsibilities. These findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue of high school dropouts and underscore the need for targeted interventions that address these various contributing factors.

Several effective program initiatives have been implemented to address the issue of high school dropout rates among students. One such initiative is the provision of tutoring services to help struggling students improve their academic performance. These services are designed to provide personalized support to students, helping them to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their studies.

Another critical program initiative is the establishment of community outreach partnerships, which aim to engage students and their families in the education process. Through these partnerships, schools can work with local organizations and community groups to provide a range of resources and services to students, such as mentoring, counseling, and after-school programs (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). In addition, remedial courses have been identified as a critical program initiative in preventing high school dropout rates. These courses are designed to help students who are struggling in specific subjects, providing them with additional instruction and support to help them catch up with their peers. By implementing these program initiatives, schools can help students overcome the challenges they face in their academic pursuits, stay engaged in their studies, and ultimately graduate from high school.

Collaborations between community leaders and schools have the potential to enhance student retention rates and engagement, ultimately leading to higher graduation rates (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Schools can partner up with local businesses, non-profit organizations, and community groups to provide students with a wide range of opportunities to connect with their community and engage in learning. These partnerships can offer internships, mentorship programs, and other forms of experiential learning that can help students develop valuable skills and gain real-world experience. Furthermore, community partnerships can help schools address issues such as truancy and absenteeism by creating a supportive network of adults who can provide guidance and encouragement to students (Sahin et al., 2016). In conclusion, these partnerships can lead to higher graduation rates and better outcomes for students, both academically and personally.

6 Conclusion

High school dropout rates among minority populations in the United States have historically been higher compared to the national average. Hispanic/Latino students and African American/black students have experienced higher dropout rates compared to white students. This quantitative study established that several factors contribute to high school dropout rates among minority populations, including poverty, limited opportunities and access to educational resources, inadequate school funding, discrimination, cultural and language barriers, lack of support services, inadequate school facilities, and systemic inequalities in the education system. Dropping out of high school can have significant long-term consequences, including lower earning potential, limited job opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, increased likelihood of involvement in criminal activities, poorer health outcomes, and reduced quality of life. The higher dropout rate of students from minority origins deepens systemic differentials which hinders the attainment of sustainable development goals.

7 Recommendation

Addressing high school dropout rates among minority populations requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying systemic inequalities and provides targeted support and resources to at-risk students

and communities. Efforts to improve educational outcomes for minority students should prioritize equity, inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and community engagement.

Any future iterations of the study should include outlining community-based partnerships for the intended school. These resources would be available for the assessment of the public and would assist in ensuring that students and their families are successful during their transition. Specific programs to review are job placement, literacy courses, familial involvement, and services that not only aid the students' success in academia but beyond into the workforce or collegiate realm along with involving the family dynamics.

8 Acknowledgment

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