Experiences of Female Dropouts: A Study in South Georgia

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Abstract: *Nationally, one in four high school students drops out in high school. Georgia, in particular, is very concerning with a 67% high school completion rate (Hickman & Heinrich, 2011) and a 41% dropout rate recorded for girls (National Women's Law Center, 2007). While these statistics are disturbing, they do not do justice to the reality of the lives of young women who leave school, nor do they reveal the underlying causes of females dropping out. This study examines female dropouts through in-depth interviews with numerous young women who are willing to share their stories. This work provides insight into the needs of young women and improvement of school practices and examines the educational, economic, vocational, and social implications of young women leaving school.*

Statistics indicate that nearly 47 million people in the United States live in poverty, with children representing 21% of that number (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Today, gender, race, and socioeconomic gaps related to poverty remain. Further, as we look at educational attainment of those living in poverty and geographic location of the most impoverished, it is clear that women (and children) living in the South are experiencing the highest levels of poverty in the country. Not coincidentally, women in the lowest socioeconomic quartile in the South also have the lowest levels of educational attainment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). To truly understand issues related to poverty in the U.S., it is imperative we move beyond statistics and explore actual lived experiences of those most affected. This study examines the lived experiences of young women who have dropped out of school to elucidate some of the causes that lead young women to leave school.

While the national high school dropout rate has been a source of much debate, most would agree the number of teenagers leaving school without a high school diploma is problematic. Further, as noted above, there are geographic regions (the South) and populations of students (Black and Hispanic young women) for whom the dropout rate is particularly devastating. Georgia, in particular, is among the states with the most dismal graduation rate, with less than 70% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013) of students graduating with a high school diploma. Upon deeper investigation, it becomes apparent that within this percentage of low graduation rates, some populations fare worse than others. For some young women, graduation seems to be a difficult prospect. For example, the National Women's Law Center (2017) reported only 60% of Black and Hispanic young women in Georgia graduated from high school in 2003-2004. In 2017, Education Week Research Center reported those percentages were 65% for Black women and 64% for Hispanic women, well below the national average of 82%. For women from poverty, the probability of graduation is even lower (NCES, Status Dropout Report, 2017).

While these statistics are disturbing, they do not clearly establish a framework for understanding the reality of the lives of young women who leave school, nor do they reveal the underlying causes of females dropping out and the circumstances that lead young women to make these choices. This paper presents findings from a study that examined the lives of female dropouts through in-depth interviews with numerous young women from southern Georgia who were willing to share their stories.

Dropping Out: The Bleak Picture

The problem of high school dropouts in the United States is astounding. Nationally, one in four high school students drops out in high school. In the southern states, one of which is the focus of this project, the statistics are even worse. Georgia, in particular, has one of the most dismal graduation rates with a 67% high school completion rate (Hickman & Heinrich, 2011) and a 41% (or higher) dropout rate recorded for girls (National Women's Law Center, 2007). While the graduation rate has been rising in recent years, poverty still remains a significant factor related to dropping out of high school. According to 2015 census data, 28.9% of persons without a high school diploma lived in poverty as compared with 14% holding a high school diploma and 5% with a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Further, we can expect this gap to widen in the future as we move more toward technological advances that will require sophisticated training. To gain ground in the fight against poverty, we must look closely at the reasons persons leave school.

We argue in this paper that the consequences for young women who drop out can be devastating. A look at the data on single-mother households indicates 30.6% of these households live in poverty as compared with 15.7% of households headed by single fathers. Most likely, this is largely in part because of gender pay gaps and because fewer jobs are available for female high school dropouts than for male high school dropouts. This issue is even greater for women of color. The poverty rate for Black women is 26.2%, and 23.6% Hispanic women live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

According to Dail (2011), one in four girls in America do not finish high school and that rate is even higher for girls of color; five out of 10 Native American girls drop out; four out of 10 Black girls, and four out of 10 Latina girls drop out of high school each year. Examining poverty in the context of young women dropping out of school gives an even more astounding picture of dropout rates (Hernandez, 2012) and underscores our assertion that understanding the experiences of young women is

crucial to eradicating poverty in the U.S. Compared to male dropouts

> Female dropouts are at a particular economic risk . . . Girls who fail to graduate from high school have higher rates of unemployment, make significantly lower wages, and are more likely to rely on public support programs to provide for their families. (National Women's Law Center, 2007, p. 5)

Further, females who graduate college are 91% less likely to receive any type of welfare assistance than female high school dropouts (National Women's Law Center, 2007). Clearly, the economic and vocational prospects for these women are quite dismal, and as we will examine through this study, these issues are compounded over time for young women unless they reenter school or are able to find another form of training.

While the data and literature on high school dropouts point to the disturbing nature of the problem, further examination into the lives of young women who leave school is needed. This study brings together in-depth interviews with numerous young women in an effort to chronicle their experiences. This examination goes beyond tabulations of the costs of lost wages, lost education, lost health care, and lost childcare that much of the research on dropouts attempts to do. This project seeks to raise awareness of the exponential impact of female adolescents dropping out on the lives of young women and their children.

Focusing on the southern state of Georgia was important given that women and children in poverty fare worse in the South, and dropout rates are highest in those states. Through this study, the women's economic, social, vocational, and educational experiences both before dropping out and after are examined and compared with the current literature on high school dropouts.

Calculating Graduation Rates

Many scholars suggest that we can never get a completely accurate account of students who leave school without graduating because the percentage of high school graduates varies from study to study.

One of the issues is the determination of an adequate accounting of the numbers of students who actually fail to complete high school, since graduation rates are derived from a number of sources. The U.S. Department of Education uses the *Census Data: Current Population Survey* as its official publication of educational attainment. This is problematic, as Mishel and Joydeep (2006) argue, because some populations are underreported. The census data likely miss those who are the most uneducated and the most impoverished. However, as critics such as Mishel and Joydeep argue, it would be more useful and accurate to obtain longitudinal data related to, in particular, eighth-grade students. They found eighth graders with the largest academic gaps were the ones who eventually dropped out of high school. It is interesting to note, as we will discuss later, that in our interviews with the young women in this study, the connections mentioned here were echoed throughout their stories.

Context: Why Girls Leave

In Do Children Drop Out in Kindergarten?, Hickman and Heinrich (2011) found there are early indications of who is most likely to drop out of school. In other words, there are factors or experiences students have that statistically make them more likely to drop out of school. While this may seem to be stating the obvious, if we are truly committed to the academic success of all students and are dedicated to raising the graduation rate, then close examination of these factors and working toward eradicating gaps is most important.

It is imperative that our discussions on high school dropouts focus on the contextualization of dropping out. Most literature and social discourse on leaving school focus on the "incident" of dropping out and, therefore, focus on what happens in high school. However, we are advocating that dropping out should not be viewed as a high school phenomenon, but rather that educators should examine dropping out in the context of child and human development and examine other factors and systems that directly impact students' lives. Dropping out should be viewed as a phenomenon that begins to form even earlier than elementary school for many.

Certainly, one important context to explore is poverty. Michelle Fine's classic work, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (1991), remains a prime example of one such exploration, documenting connections between low SES and high potentiality for dropping out. Her work reminds us that the "silenced voices" of impoverished students remain one of the most pressing issues to address in schools. Donald Hernandez (2012) found in his longitudinal study that students from poverty are three times as likely to drop out compared to their middle-class counterparts. Further, Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapion (2008) point out that many Latino/Latina students drop out to work to support struggling, impoverished families. This dropping out is systematic, driven by social forces at work in the lives of Latino children. For young women from poverty, the likelihood of dropping out is even more pronounced. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), students from low-income families are three times more likely to drop out of school. As income drops even lower, "female students from families in the lowest quartile of SES drop out at a rate five times more likely than the rate of females from the highest" (p. 2). In the interviews with the young women in this study, poverty is a resounding issue.

The second factor that researchers have been able to link to dropping out is school readiness. According to Hernandez (2012), students who are unable to read proficiently by the third grade (a pivotal literacy point) are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma. His work found poor reading skills by third grade coupled with poverty make students six times more likely to drop out. Finally, a child who lacks reading skills by the critical third grade, comes from poverty, and is either Black or Latino is as much as eight times more likely to drop out of school (Hernandez, 2012). This is the most critical population and this disparity is seen time and time again when examining achievement gaps.

According to Hickman and Heinrich (2011), classroom performance is also very important to monitor, as over time (future) graduates tend to move toward performing at ability level, while (future) dropouts begin to demonstrate performance/ability gaps. Performance/ability gaps are represented in standardized test scores which demonstrate (future) dropouts performing below average while graduates move gradually toward performing above average.

Hickman and Heinrich (2011) found that high school dropouts are more likely to have been retained at some point in their academic careers, indicating earlier examples of struggles with school. The authors also point out frequent absenteeism as an early indicator of dropping out of school, albeit the authors point out that often absenteeism is due to factors beyond the control of schools. These authors also found that the "dropout path becomes more pronounced as children progressed from elementary to middle school" (p. 45). This absenteeism, the authors argue, speaks to the social context of dropping out. The remedial, "catching-up" strategies attempted by schools to address issues related to school failure and absenteeism are ineffective, these authors argue, because they do not address the "academic, familial, and behavioral pathways of children from the students' perspectives throughout his or her time in school" (p. 60).

Who Drops Out

In addition to poverty and declining school performance, another reason that many young women leave school is due to pregnancy or becoming a teen parent. While it seems to be easy to simply blame young women for their pregnancies, the phenomenon of teen pregnancy and parenting is a social issue that impacts us all.

"Teen mothers are less likely to complete the education necessary to qualify for a well-paying job; only 41% of mothers who have children before the age of 18 complete high school" (Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 41). These authors also point out that the daughters of teen parents are 22% more likely to become teen mothers themselves. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), 30% to 40% of female teenage dropouts are mothers. Women who drop out of high school are more likely to become pregnant, often becoming single parents. "For economically disadvantaged girls unquestionably the biggest barrier to completing high school is becoming pregnant" (Dail, 2011, p. 166).

According to Cartina (2010), 54% of Latina teen mothers do not graduate from high school. Only 2% of teens who get pregnant graduate college before the age of 30, and eight out of 10 teen fathers do not marry their child's teen mother, leaving many young women to raise children as single parents.

Varlas (2011) points to the lack of transportation and childcare for teen mothers, as well as extended absences and other scheduling conflicts, as reasons young women leave school. Varlas also points out that many schools do not send work home for pregnant teens, and girls often come back to school six to eight weeks behind.

Methods

This study focuses primarily on the issue as it relates to young women who drop out in southern Georgia. Following IRB approval, volunteers from various social groups and local community organizations helped with the recruitment of the participants. This work provides insight into the needs of young women and improvement of school practices to strengthen the "promoting power" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004) of schools. We examine the educational, economic, vocational, and social implications of young women leaving school as well as obstacles regarding reentry into educational pathways from the perspectives of young women living that experience.

The study involved in-depth interviews with eight young women in southern Georgia between the ages of 18–30 who had left school without receiving a high school diploma. Relying on critical feminist methodology to guide us in our work allowed us to value the experiences of the young women participating in the story and to recognize their experiences as part of a gendered world with multiple hierarchies and inequalities within social life (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). The semistructured nature of the interviews allowed there to be a basic format for the interview questions, but also allowed for the young women to speak openly and freely on any issue they wished. Choosing to interview these young women and allowing them to speak openly about their experiences and contextualize them within their other life experiences were important to this study. We chose to audio record the interviews so that we could listen carefully and respect the narratives the women told. Data analysis utilized constant comparison analysis as supported by Fram (2013). Interviews were transcribed and coded to allow researchers to identify both common and unique themes in the data. Our goal was to "tell the story" of the individually lived experiences of the women we interviewed to identify commonalities that may hold clues to help unravel the knot of female high school dropouts.

The guiding questions that helped shape the interview focused around the women's school experiences beginning as early as they could remember. As will be discussed in the findings, we wanted to examine how their perceptions of their school experiences and encounters with educational institutions throughout their lives shaped their experience. Of course, we were concerned also with what incidents or experiences outside of school influenced their decision to leave. Recognizing that dropping out of school is a social phenomenon that not only involves school experiences directly but also is a reflection of other social factors, and understanding the influence of these social factors on young women's decisions to leave school is very important.

Next, our guiding questions also centered around the vocational, social, educational, and financial experiences of the young women after they left school without a high school diploma. We were concerned with their perception of how dropping out of high school has impacted their lives and their children's lives. Statistics show that

female high school dropouts experience greater economic hardships and that these factors have a ripple effect on the next generation.

Finally, we were interested in hearing from the young women regarding what they thought could have been done to keep them in school or have made an easier transition for them to reenter school once they left. Their recommendations were incorporated into our discussion of dropout prevention strategies. Obviously, there were a number of issues that evolved from our discussions with these young women. Teen parenting and pregnancy, harassment, employment discrimination, abuse, disengaging curriculum, and more all became very prevalent in our discussions. Their stories emerged through these semistructured interviews to highlight the struggles and also the commonality of experience that these women share.

Findings

We have chosen to present each woman's experience separately before examining the stories collectively for any conclusions. We wanted to show the uniqueness of each woman's experience and to underscore the need for further opportunities for young women to share their educational journeys.

The Women's Stories

Connie is a Black woman. At the time of this interview she was 26 years old. She asked to bring two of her children to the interview since she was unable to obtain childcare. While her early days of school she recalled as pleasant and "fun," she was retained in fourth grade for missing too many days. She and her four siblings lived with a single mother who did not finish high school and was working two jobs. She was often left in charge of the younger siblings, and it was her responsibility to get everyone ready for school. Connie discussed how she often got her younger siblings out of the house and on the bus, but she was unable to muster up the energy to make it to school herself. She regrets that her mother did not push her more or had been more involved. She lived downtown during her elementary school years but was bussed to a school by the beach that was about 15 miles away. She also recalled pleasant memories of middle school and remembers doing well in school during those years. However, she remembers in middle school she began to struggle with math. She described how her struggles with math in particular made her feel as though she could not be successful. She never studied and often "partied" after school. During middle school, Connie went to *five* different schools, moving in with mom, then grandma, and back to mom . . . then found out she was pregnant when she was 15. She had to start working and had to focus on "finding a babysitter." Despite her struggles, she went on to have four more kids, for a total of five kids. Her children have different fathers, and none of the fathers contributes any child support or has any relationship with her kids. She supported her children through her work at fast-food restaurants and public assistance. Throughout her teens and twenties, she had been working at several fast-food restaurants and recently realized that she needed to go back to school. Since her children are now attending public elementary school and she no longer has to pay for childcare, she has been able to go back to school to work on her GED. We met while Connie was studying for her GED. She expressed an interest in going to college since she never got that experience. She left school as a result of the turmoil in her life, the constant moving. When she began to struggle in math, she received no assistance and could no longer keep up. With frequent absences, she also grew further behind in middle school. And then when her first child was born, she was not encouraged to stay in school. Her life up to this point has been a struggle. She finds herself very closely resembling her mother, and she stated that she wants better for her kids.

Rachel is a Black woman who was 19 at the time of this interview. While she looked back fondly on her early childhood/elementary school years, she said she was retained in "second or third" grade "because the teacher didn't like me." She recalled a story in which the teacher told her to go into the bathroom, and while in there, she was punched in the stomach by a male classmate. She claims the teacher encouraged the boy to punch her. She also claims the teacher altered answers on her tests so she would deliberately not do well. She said that she did not know she got "left back" in the third grade until the following year when she returned to the same grade. According to Rachel, she always felt like an outcast at school because her mom could not afford to buy her and her four siblings school clothes. Rachel recalled that they would often have to wear torn clothing or would have to borrow clothing from the school's clothing closet. Although Rachel said she was doing "okay" in high school, she also said, "School didn't have much interest in me." She said she saw an ad for the Job Corps and thought she could leave school and obtain her GED faster. She joined the Job Corps, but she had a very unpleasant experience and ended up dropping out. She was now working on attempting to go back for her GED because she said she wants to go to college. From her perspective, it would have made a difference with her staying in school if she had had a teacher or caring adult in the school reach out to her. But between struggling with money in her home life and feeling isolated in school, she felt no choice but to drop out.

Tawana is an 18-year-old Black woman. In recalling her early childhood school days, Tawana referred to herself as an honor roll student in elementary school. She even recalled getting awards and recognition in elementary school for her academic performance. She became pregnant in eighth grade. When she attempted to attend school as a pregnant student, teachers would not let her go to the restroom or move around. She had frequent discomfort and illness and found her teachers and the school staff to be completely unsympathetic. She left school for a year or so after entering high school and then tried to go back to high school after she had the baby. She was far behind in credits and was placed in a grade or two below her peers. Tawana felt like she was too mature, and she was behind

and was not with her age group, so she said she left school altogether. This was a couple of years ago, and she has been on public assistance since then. Tawana said she does not want her daughter to follow in her footsteps (like her mom), so she is going back to school. She wishes her mother would have pushed her, but she noted that her mom was often not around. Instead, her boyfriend's mom played a pivotal role in her going back to school. Unable to find a job that does not require at least a GED, she has recently completed her GED and plans to attend a technical college to study in the medical assistant or commercial truck driving program. Tawana noted one of the problems with obtaining a GED or reentry into an educational institution is difficulty with reliable transportation to and from the classes.

Sandy is a White 23-year-old woman. She was an honor student in middle school. In fact, she recalled being such a good student in elementary school that she scored "abnormally high" on the English portion of the standardized test in her state. Sandy recalled that in her late middle school years she began moving, as her dad was in the military, and that is when things got "hard." She started having problems with mathematics in middle school (seventh grade). Sandy did not feel as though she had parental guidance or support. "School just wasn't for me," she noted. She has a lot of memories of being bullied in school, largely due to her heavy weight. "If I was homeschooled or offered online class of some sort, it would have been very useful and I probably wouldn't of dropped out. They [school personnel] saw how I was struggling and no one lent a helping hand." After she dropped out of school, she was encouraged by a friend to get checked for ADD. "Getting diagnosed with ADD and getting on medicine was a life changer for me." Since she has been on medication for ADD, Sandy has completed her GED and has a goal to become an ESL teacher.

Amber is a 25-year-old White woman. She recalled her elementary school years as the most memorable for her. She did well in school, did not have any social issues, had friends, and did not remember struggling with anything. She began elementary school at a small private school and then was transferred to a public school, although she could not recall why. Art was her favorite subject and she loved playing outside. She was fond of her teachers in school. She moved to Saudi Arabia briefly at the end of elementary school. Fifth grade was when she began having difficulty in school both academically and socially. She recalls she did not comprehend subjects, "particularly math." Amber remembered her teachers after fifth grade making her "feel stupid" while she was struggling, and she wished that she had more opportunities for one-on-one tutoring. She was retained in fifth grade, and after being retained, she moved in with her mom and was tested and diagnosed with ADD. She moved to a small private school for kids with learning disabilities in middle school. She looks back fondly at her time in that school and said the structure and the small class size really helped her thrive. However, Amber recalled there were "troubles at home," so she left that school and moved to another state with her dad. She struggled at her new high school and did not pass the 11th grade. Because she fell behind in Carnegie Units, she left school and took several jobs at fast-food restaurants. She attempted to take the GED at age 20 but failed the math portion. In the meantime, she met a man and had a baby. Returning to school was not an option for her and passing the GED was no longer a goal. However, she spent the next few years desperate for financial stability—working a variety of odd jobs. One of her coworkers encouraged her to take the GED. She did and this time she passed. At the time of this interview, she was enrolled in a computer class, working on basic computer skills to get an administrative-type job. She recognizes that she is fortunate to have a stepmom who watches her child and allows her to use her car; otherwise she would not be able to attend these classes and probably would not have acquired her GED. She suggests that teachers really need to know more about learning disabilities so they can help students like her.

Latoya, a 22-year-old Black woman, recalled school as always being somewhat difficult for her. She remembered getting in trouble as early as kindergarten for talking too much. She remembered starting to struggle with grades in third grade. She moved to different schools a couple of times, but she remembers school (particularly math) being a struggle at this point in her life. She also recounted being bullied in fifth grade. From this point on through middle school, Latoya said she was harassed and bullied. She was not successful because of these experiences, according to Latoya. Because of her struggles, her mom homeschooled her when she began high school. She got pregnant during her high school years. She started working as a dog groomer and left school altogether and did not complete homeschooling. Instead, she became involved in a violent relationship. With no financial wherewithal, she felt hopeless. After her boyfriend pushed her and abused her, she left him and found the courage to enroll in a GED program and eventually received her diploma. She has most recently been accepted to a local college where she is considering a major in criminal justice. Despite her recent successes, she feels resentful that she was passed along through school while lacking basic comprehension and math skills. According to Latoya, she is still struggling with academic skills that she missed in her earlier school days.

Nancy, a 24-year-old White woman, always enjoyed elementary school. She loved studying and her teachers and was never retained in school. She also enjoyed middle school, but she was enrolled in an intensive-reading program because she did not score well on the Florida standardized test. Nonetheless, she remembers being very involved in high school—in clubs and on the yearbook staff. She was an active student on campus and overall did well academically, according to Nancy. Then she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and started missing a lot of school. She noted that when she missed weeks of school from being in the hospital that one of her neighbors came and told the school that she moved, so she was unenrolled in her senior year. According to Nancy, despite her parents' pleas, she was not able to reenroll in the school and thus couldn't graduate. She ended up dropping out in what would have been her senior year and is currently pursuing her GED.

While there were some inconsistencies with her story, what did appear evident was the lack of advocacy on her behalf.

Wakesha is a 29-year-old Black woman. Wakesha was retained in ninth grade. Wakesha recounted being on high honor roll in elementary school. She was a member in the 4-H club, participated in spelling bees, and recalled being viewed as a leader in elementary school. She grew up with a single mom as one of four kids. According to Wakesha, her mom set her up and introduced her to someone as her real father, but the man said to her face that he was not her dad. She noted that she has really grown up devastated about not having a father. While Wakesha admitted they were poor, her mom did the best she could to make sure she was clean and presentable. Wakesha grew up in public housing, or "the projects." She remembered moving frequently between her mother's house in the projects and her grandmother's in the next state over, and even bouts of time with her aunt who also lived in the projects. All this time that she moved, she was attending different schools, so she had no real consistency in her educational experience. She recalled moving in with her grandmother right before ninth grade. She began skipping school and doing drugs once she arrived at her grandmothers home. She then moved back with her mom. One day in ninth grade, she said one of the guys she grew up in the "pjs" with threw a bottle of water at her in the cafeteria. She retaliated against him the next day and got expelled. No parent or grandparent attended the hearing for her, so she was expelled permanently. She was then forced to leave high school. Wakesha was not working at the time of this interview, but she said her boyfriend was pushing her to get her GED, and she says she wants to be an RN. Buying a car and a house someday are her ambitions.

Discussion

It was clear in speaking with all of these young women that while their stories are each unique, there is opportunity for us to examine young women's experiences. In interviewing these women, using constant comparative analysis, a few patterns emerged. These patterns confirmed what the current literature says regarding high school dropouts, but there were also some contradictions with the women's experiences. For example, it is evident the role that poverty played in these women's lives, and the extent to which it influenced their decisions to leave school is evident and in line with the research literature (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). We are reminded, though, that these decisions or choices to drop out of school were often made in children's lives before they had a chance to make them themselves. Bradley & Renzulli (2011) refer to this phenomenon as the "push" and "pull" to drop out that many children from poverty experience. Many of the young women with whom we spoke talked about living in public housing, growing up with many siblings, growing up in single-parent (mother) homes, and living a transient lifestyle, often being passed among different relatives. While it may be easy to blame the young women, this generational pattern presented itself in their lives once they left school. Many of them went on to have multiple children with no relationship with the children's fathers. They are currently on public assistance and are following the pattern presented to them as children (Beegle, 2015).

Many of the young women we interviewed cited their struggles with math in school as one of the reasons, if not *the* reason, they were not successful. It is interesting that the research, in particular that conducted by Hernandez (2012), points to literacy skills in the third grade as an early indicator of school success. Research is needed to explore the dropout rates and their association with math achievement for young women. Based on the findings from this study, there could be a very interesting link between those two. As research suggests (Mishel & Joydeep, 2006), many of these women were retained at some point in their academic careers. Further, several of the young women discussed their diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) later in life, a connection that Pelham (2005) supports. These women assert that if they had been treated earlier, they may have been more successful in school. It is also very important to note that several of the women described some incident with bullying or violence as a cause of their leaving school. This certainly corresponds with the findings of Rahimi and Liston (2013) in their work on sexual harassment in schools. Young women (and young men) who are victimized in some way by harassment or bullying often leave school.

Probably the most compelling finding, and one that leaves the most questions, is how young women start out loving school, being successful, earning distinctions and awards, loving their teachers and staff and then end up finding school a place "not for them." This finding does not easily correspond to the research literature which argues that many school-leavers are held back grades or are not reading proficiently by third grade, and may represent an anomaly. Further research is needed to ascertain if this is a gendered difference in high school dropouts, and therefore not identified in research that addresses dropouts more generally. Citing their experiences with bullying and academic problems and not having a "caring" staff to help them navigate these at school, we are left to ask many questions: What have we done to isolate these young women? Why are our schools so unsympathetic to the plight of kids from poverty? Why are women of color marginalized? How are pregnant and parenting teens to survive once kicked out of school? We have a large population of kids who leave school with no education, no skills, and no hope. We need to continue to investigate the experiences of young students and the reasons they leave school. Additionally, we need to examine resources and outreach programs for providing skills and education for disengaged youth.

Conclusions

The stories of the women show some commonality to their experiences. As recalled by these young women, issues related to poverty, absenteeism, academic struggles (with math in particular), frequent changes in schools, and a lack of perceived support or care from school personnel all contributed to their decision to leave school. These

issues are often masked when looking at the issue of dropouts as merely a statistical issue. Women's stories as examined through critical methodologies must continue to be explored if we want to fully understand the reasons women drop out and impact poverty levels in the U.S. Further, there needs to be more effort into finding the most accurate data on the number of young women who drop out of school. The National Women's Law Center (2007) recommends addressing the need for more gender-disaggregated data on dropout rates, improving the data on dropout rates (citing inconsistent calculation, data collection, and reporting). We add that these data also need to be disaggregated by race and SES.

We need research addressing the issues of poverty and inequality. After examining practices that have worked to increase the success rate with students from the most impoverished backgrounds, schools should begin to adopt these practices. Those of us in teacher education and education policy have to continue to engage teachers and future teacher candidates in discourse surrounding the impact of poverty on education equality and argue for effective teachers and practices that serve impoverished populations. Further, there needs to be additional support for pregnant/parenting teens through childcare classes, specialized scheduling, necessary accommodations (larger desks), efforts to reenroll dropouts, and individualized graduation plans for pregnant and parenting teens. Rigorous technical career training for girls, stronger protection from sexual harassment/bullying, and education on reporting instances (Rahimi & Liston, 2013) work to ensure girls have access to after-school programs. Smink and Schargel (2004) offer suggestions for dropout prevention—engaging the parents through early literacy development and providing a solid mentoring program for adolescents is important. They point to the research conducted by Big Brothers Big Sisters Mentoring and AmeriCorps programs, which show results impacting school performance, self-esteem, reduced at-risk behaviors, and improved family relationships. The authors cite "service-learning, after-school activities, professional development, active learning, technology-based instruction, and career/technical education" (Smink & Schargel, p. 72) as other worthy programs to explore in dropout prevention.

Additionally, in its report *What Would a Successful, Safe and Healthy School Look Like for Girls*, the National Women's Law Center (2007) suggests young women need more opportunities to develop and explore their athletic abilities, need "medically accurate sex education," and more access to "positive approaches to discipline."

Certainly one of the most interesting findings of this study was the number of young women we interviewed who cited their struggles with math in particular as a reason for dropping out of school. This potential connection needs to be further researched and addressed as a way to support young women's success.

We need more research on the impact of dropping out. Instead of marginalizing young women, we need to find ways to reengage them with educational opportunities so that they can develop skills and gain vocations that benefit them and their children so they can break the cycle of poverty that so many find themselves in.

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