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Factors impacting school dropout and criminal activities in Urban Belize. Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Belize, Belize C.A.

**ABSTRACT**

This research provides insight on teacher's perception of factors affecting completion rates among disadvantage students in two south side schools in urban Belize, Central America. Previous research on causes for increased criminal activity in Belize suggests that school dropout, lack of parental guidance, and unsupportive school environment are major contributing factors. A convenience sample of teachers from two urban low income communities were included in the study. To assess perceptions for increasing levels of dropout among low income students, a Likert scale instrument and open ended items was also utilized. The results from the Mann Whitney test revealed that there is no significant difference  $p < 0.211$  for factors pertaining to completion rates among students from disadvantage communities. Teachers perceived that lack of finances, involvement in non-academic activities, lack of parental guidance and support, low levels of motivation and limited academic skills were primary contributing factors. These findings also suggest the need for interventions to cater to students living in poverty stricken and in criminal infested communities. The general view is that unless immediate mentorship and financial support is forthcoming, youths will continue to drop out of secondary schools, crime rates will increase and the many young persons in Belize will lack the opportunity to live productive lives and contribute positively to society.

Key Terms: Mentorship and support, School Dropout, Disadvantaged youths

Belize is situated on the eastern coast of Central America and is bordered north by Mexico and southwest by Guatemala. In 2019, the population of Belize was estimated at 390,353 which illustrates an increase of 65,855 from the 2010 census of 324,500. There are six districts in the country of Belize. The largest city is Belize City, also the old capital, and has a population of approximately 60,000 which represents 20% of the country's population. This city is divided in two major zones known as Southside and Northside, Belize. Most upper and middle class citizens reside on the northern section of Belize City while Southside is comprised of persons mainly in the middle and lower income brackets.

Belize's school system is an amalgamation of early Jesuit influence and U.S. school system (Bennett, 2008). Approximately, 90,000 students are enrolled in Belize's School system with estimates of 4,000 in the preschools or Early Childhood; 63,000 in Primary/Elementary Schools; and 15,000 in High/Secondary schools (Central Statistical Institute of Belize, 2014). Recent data suggest that approximately 6,000 (4%) of students are pursuing tertiary

education in Belize. This shows that only a small percentage of the citizens further their education beyond high school or secondary education.

A review of enrolment trends of secondary students for the Belize District (2019) shows that the largest number of entrants occurs in the first year of schooling labelled as Form 1 as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: 2 Year Enrolment Trends of Belize City High/Secondary School Students

District and Sex	2017-18					2018-19				
	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	TOTAL	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	TOTAL
<b>Belize</b>	<b>2,066</b>	<b>1,802</b>	<b>1,642</b>	<b>1,425</b>	<b>6,935</b>	<b>2,054</b>	<b>1,817</b>	<b>1,719</b>	<b>1,402</b>	<b>6,992</b>
<b>Male</b>	1,013	866	744	615	<b>3,238</b>	1,005	859	806	614	<b>3,284</b>
<b>Female</b>	1,053	936	898	810	<b>3,697</b>	1,049	958	913	788	<b>3,708</b>

Illustrated in this table is that for the 2017/2018 academic year, the total number of students entering secondary schools in the Belize District was 2,066. Ordinarily, these students should transition to Form 2 in 2018/2019; however, the data revealed that of the 2,066 students enrolled in Form 1 in 2017/2018, only 1,817 transitioned to Form 2 in 2018/2019. While causes for the decrease in transition from Form 1 to 2 is unstated, apparent is that not all students who enter secondary school transition through the school system.

In addition to transition rates at the Secondary Level of Schooling in Belize, data on Repetition by Form, District, and sex is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Repetition Rate by Form, District and Sex in Belize

Form and Sex	2016-17										2017-18																	
	Belize		Cayo		Corozal		Orange Walk		Stann Creek		Toledo		Overall Repeaters		Belize		Cayo		Corozal		Orange Walk		Stann Creek		Toledo		Overall Repeaters	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Form 1	158	7.7	81	5.0	49	6.5	62	9.1	70	7.8	42	6.7	462	7.0	145	7.0	95	5.8	44	5.9	64	8.7	61	7.1	36	5.6	445	6.7
Male	96	9.3	49	6.0	30	7.6	28	8.6	52	11.2	29	8.8	284	8.4	101	10.0	61	7.5	26	7.1	28	8.1	38	8.6	23	6.8	277	8.4
Female	62	6.2	32	4.0	19	5.3	34	9.4	18	4.2	13	4.4	178	5.5	44	4.2	34	4.1	18	4.7	36	9.2	23	5.5	13	4.3	168	5.0
Form 2	135	7.5	76	5.3	33	5.7	66	10.3	43	5.9	17	3.0	370	6.5	89	4.9	79	5.7	41	6.5	56	9.7	36	4.8	20	3.5	321	5.6
Male	73	8.7	39	5.7	23	8.3	36	12.3	25	7.5	11	3.8	207	7.6	58	6.7	54	8.3	20	6.1	32	12.3	23	6.2	15	5.2	202	7.3
Female	62	6.5	37	5.0	10	3.3	30	8.6	18	4.6	6	2.2	163	5.4	31	3.3	25	3.4	21	6.9	24	7.5	13	3.4	5	1.8	119	4.0
Form 3	112	6.7	88	7.0	35	6.5	46	8.2	60	8.1	20	4.4	361	6.9	133	8.1	83	6.4	50	8.7	63	11.4	16	2.4	11	2.3	356	6.8
Male	59	8.1	49	8.5	26	11.4	24	9.2	36	10.4	15	6.5	209	8.8	69	9.3	53	8.6	25	9.3	32	13.8	9	3.1	8	3.3	196	8.2
Female	53	5.7	39	5.8	9	2.9	22	7.4	24	6.1	5	2.3	152	5.4	64	7.1	30	4.4	25	8.2	31	9.6	7	1.9	3	1.3	160	5.7
Form 4	41	2.9	26	2.3	12	2.7	28	6.3	10	1.6	9	2.1	126	2.8	46	3.2	51	4.8	21	4.5	26	5.4	15	2.7	1	0.2	160	3.6
Male	21	3.4	14	2.7	10	4.4	18	9.0	6	2.1	8	3.8	77	3.7	26	4.2	30	6.4	14	7.3	19	8.1	8	3.4	1	0.5	98	5.0
Female	20	2.6	12	1.9	2	0.9	10	4.1	4	1.2	1	0.5	49	2.0	20	2.5	21	3.5	7	2.5	7	2.9	7	2.1	0	0.0	62	2.5
Total	446	6.5	271	5.0	129	5.5	202	8.7	183	6.1	88	4.3	1319	6.0	413	6.0	308	5.7	156	6.5	209	8.9	128	4.5	68	3.3	1282	5.8
Male	249	7.7	151	5.8	89	7.9	106	9.8	119	8.3	63	6.0	777	7.4	254	7.8	198	7.8	85	7.4	111	10.4	78	5.9	47	4.3	773	7.4
Female	197	5.3	120	4.2	40	3.3	96	7.7	64	4.1	25	2.5	542	4.7	159	4.3	110	3.9	71	5.6	98	7.7	50	3.3	21	2.1	509	4.4

The data show that there was a higher repetition rate in Form 1 (7.7%) and Form 2 (7.5%) for 2016/2017. Also shown is that repetition was highest among males (Ministry of Education Statistics, 2019). A review of the qualification of secondary school teachers by district also revealed that in the Belize District, there are more teachers with higher educational training including qualifications at the Master's Degree Level. Therefore, most teachers in this district are highly trained or are pursuing educational training. Given that teachers in this district are most skilled and the repetition rates are still high points to possible institutional and external factors affecting school dropout.

To develop a deeper understanding of dropout rates in the Belize District, data on drop out by district and sex is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Drop out data by District and Sex

Form and Sex	2016-17										2017-18																	
	Belize		Cayo		Corozal		Orange Walk		Stann Creek		Toledo		Overall Dropout		Belize		Cayo		Corozal		Orange Walk		Stann Creek		Toledo		Overall Dropout	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Form 1	182	8.9	114	7.0	49	6.5	66	9.6	81	9.1	58	9.3	550	8.3	87	4.2	73	4.4	94	12.7	54	7.3	64	7.5	37	5.8	409	6.1
Male	120	11.6	71	8.7	28	7.1	41	12.6	47	10.1	34	10.3	341	10.1	54	5.3	45	5.5	58	15.9	28	8.1	33	7.5	22	6.5	240	7.2
Female	62	6.2	43	5.3	21	5.8	25	8.9	34	7.9	24	8.1	209	6.4	33	3.1	28	3.4	36	9.5	26	6.6	31	7.4	15	5.0	169	5.0

Shown in the second column which represent the Belize District on which this study is based, is that in the first year of schooling labelled as Form 1, for 2016/2017, the repetition for Males was 120 (11.6%) and Females 62 (6.2%). In the academic year 2017/2018 for Form 1, Belize District, the repetition rate for Males was 54 (5.3%) and Females 33 (3.1%). Clearly, there are more males dropping out of school than females. The greatest number of dropout also occurs in the first year of schooling which points for the need for initial intervention to retain students in school. In addition, the current data on transition from one class level to another according to the 2018 United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in Belize is that approximately forty percent of children in Belize suffer from poverty, preventing them from accessing education, justice, security, and health (UNICEF, 2018). More than half of the mandatory school aged children are out of school and have not acquired the skills to make a living or earn an income (Gayle, 2010 p.274). Inner city violence is also visible among persons from low socio economic background. These findings point to critical issues affecting youths in Belize City and the need for immediate interventions to curb challenges.

### **Factors That Contribute to School Dropout or completion**

Lau, (2003) maintains that retention has become a challenge for the academic community; therefore, there is need for effective measures to decrease the dropout rates within institutions of higher learning. Some factors that contribute to dropout include: lack of finance, changing academics or career goals, and unrelated personal circumstances (Borgen & Borgen, 2015). Students are often required to pay fees, which equates to the monthly income of the greatest proportion of their parents/guardians (Department of Education, 2005). Clearly lack of finances can affect the extent to which students remain in school.

In addition to financial challenges, many students also leave school due to inappropriate classroom ethos (Higher Education South Africa, 2008). That is, students often feel unable to cope with peer pressure, teacher expectations, and the general demands of the school system (Gotthel & Smith (2014). A considerable number of students also lack the motivation and background skills to cope with academic demands (Hovdhaugen & Aamodt, 2009). Despite that a number of studies suggest that problems with retention occur most among children from low income families, to be noted is that many also complete as top performers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A review of a number of academic support programs developed and implemented by six institutions across the United States illustrated that academic and career advisors are essential to retention, (Lau, 2003). There is also the need for more emphasis on teaching and learning using innovative pedagogical strategies to increase motivation and achievement (Crosling et. al., 2009). Additionally, institutions must use appropriate interventions and a longitudinal process of interactions among students to attend to and cater to individual needs, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Abramson and Jones, 2003; Tinto, 1993; Breier, 2010; Yorke, 1999).

Despite challenges associated with low retention, it is important to reflect on how best to support students to remain in school. Borgen & Borgen (2015) noted that improving student retention is paramount if countries are to build on human capital and citizens develop requisite life skills. We must also be cognizant that in the advent of the new knowledge economy, higher education has increasingly been tied into the world of work (Levy and Murnane 2004; Trow 2007). That is, the number of skilled workers is perceived to be crucial to nations' future prospects (Bailey 2007). Suggested is that attempts to assist students to attend and complete their programs of study is paramount for personal and national development (Brown-Lopez 2018).

Further analysis of entry and completion rates in the U.S.A. showed that among high-income students who enter higher education in the mid-1990s, 56 % persist to earn a degree within 6 years after beginning their studies. Among the low-income students, this figure is only 26 % (Tinto 2010). Clearly, improving student matriculation among low-income students is crucial to abolish class inequality (Vignoles and Powdthavee 2009). Even as it is important to question why students, especially those from low socio economic background, fail to complete school must assume proactive measures such as focusing on career or educational guidance to improve student retention (Yorke & Longden, 2008). This means that assisting students to make more informed choices can increase retention and increase motivation to remain in school. While this is true, the massification of higher education systems increases diversity in response to a larger student population with a greater variety of abilities and interests (Trow, 2006). Without proper guidance and support, the number of students leaving before degree completion is bound to increase (Borgen & Borgen, 2015). This perspective suggests that higher education also brings wider participation and institutions can no longer assume that all students are equally motivated or well-prepared for the course they have chosen. This often may also result in some leaving before degree completion (Tinto, 1993; Yorke 1999). Apparent is that student departure and retention are complex issues (Abramson & Jones, 2003), and the need to fully comprehend the different types of student departure, consequences and measures (Trow, 2007). Undoubtedly, schools must address causes of low completion rates if they are to truly embrace and account for the service they provide.

### **Sampling Procedures**

A number of factors impact on students' retention. These include: pre-entry information, preparation and admission processes; transition support; learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum development; social engagement; student support, and financial challenges (Jones, 2008). To examine possible causes for low retention and dropout rates of students at the secondary level of schooling in Belize City, a convenience sample of 42 educators, 69% were females and 31% males, from two Southside schools. The instrument was comprised of two closed ended questions and 14 open ended. Teachers and administrators were also interviewed to gather examples of day-to-day experiences which influenced students' inability to complete their programs of study.

### **Findings**

The data was analysed using measures of central tendency and a t test for independent sample to compare whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means of the two unrelated groups. Data obtained from the use of a semi-structured interview guide was analyse qualitatively. Information obtained from the research instrument sought responses to the following specific questions:

1. What are some factors that contribute to continuous dropout of students in Southside high schools in Belize City, Belize C.A.?
2. How does attrition among disadvantaged youths affect communities in Southside Belize City?

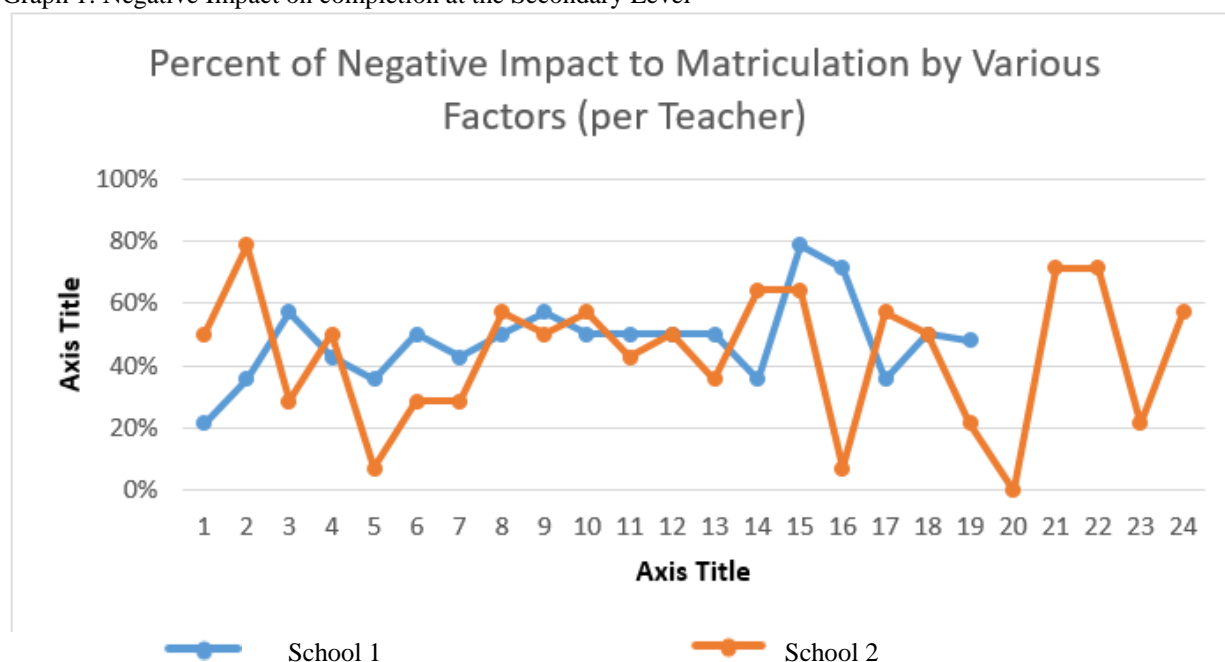
The following major factors were analysed to respond to the research questions:

1. Inadequate preparation for high school level work
2. Inadequate school supplies
3. Inadequate financial resources
4. Inappropriate study skills
5. First generation to attend college

6. Socio economic status/disadvantage
7. Lack of commitment to completing program of study
8. Peer Influence
9. Health Problems
10. Home condition

To assess impact of school dropout within secondary schools, educators' responses to each of the major factors were graphed as illustrated in the Graph 1 below.

Graph 1: Negative Impact on completion at the Secondary Level



Illustrated in the line graph is the percent response of the effects of dropping out of school. The x axis represents the number assigned to each educator in the sample. Their percent response is illustrated on the y axis.

Shown is that there are varying responses of the effects of dropout rates on Southside communities in Belize City. Most educators felt that the dropout rates have no significant impact on the communities where the students reside; that is, educators perceived that whether students dropped out or not, this would not minimize crime rates or improve living conditions. This view is contrary to research which shows that school dropout results in low self-esteem, unhappiness, and may evoke elicit aggressive behaviors (Mileto, J., Trevenhan, S., & Moore, J. (2004). To further interpret the perception that dropout among low income students in Southside Belize City will not significantly affect their communities, response from the semi structured interviews revealed that:

Teacher 5 (School 1)

Whether students drop out of school or not, the conditions in the Southside of Belize City will not change. It may over time increase living conditions if students remain in their communities and are employed. However, over the years we have noticed that those who complete and are somewhat successful move out of these environment. Those who are unsuccessful or drop out of school remain and the cycle continues. What I mean is that the situation is more than who drops out or who stays that will make a difference; it is more the customs and life styles that must change! There is need for support and interventions to make a real difference.

Teacher 20 (School 2)

I know people always say that schools can bring about change and I agree; however, when things are as bad as they are, schools can only do so much. We can help to retain disadvantaged youths in schools. But whether this is true or

not, it does not change the dynamics of their environment. In fact, more than 80% of people in those environments do not like school and have no interest in attending school. So as you can see, it is more than providing an education as a community changer. We are talking about serious investment and support for persons living in vulnerable communities.

Shown by both perspectives is that changes within these low economic communities require much more interventions than an attempt to ensure that students in these communities complete their programs of study. Despite that this may be true, Hull (1998), reminds that education and job training can provide at risk youths or those living in disadvantaged community with opportunities to improve their standard of living and motivate others to do the same.

Further noted in Graph 1 is that only 2 teachers (teacher # 2 and 15) strongly perceived that dropping out of school affects communities. The fact that only 2 of the 41 educators are of the view that dropping out of school can significantly affect communities points to a general “lack of hope” even among persons who should be optimistic and should mentor students to succeed. Pau (2014) posits that these negative perception coincide with negative public perceptions. What this really means is that even as stakeholders seek opportunities to make changes, the perception that change is difficult or almost impossible is often perceived by many.

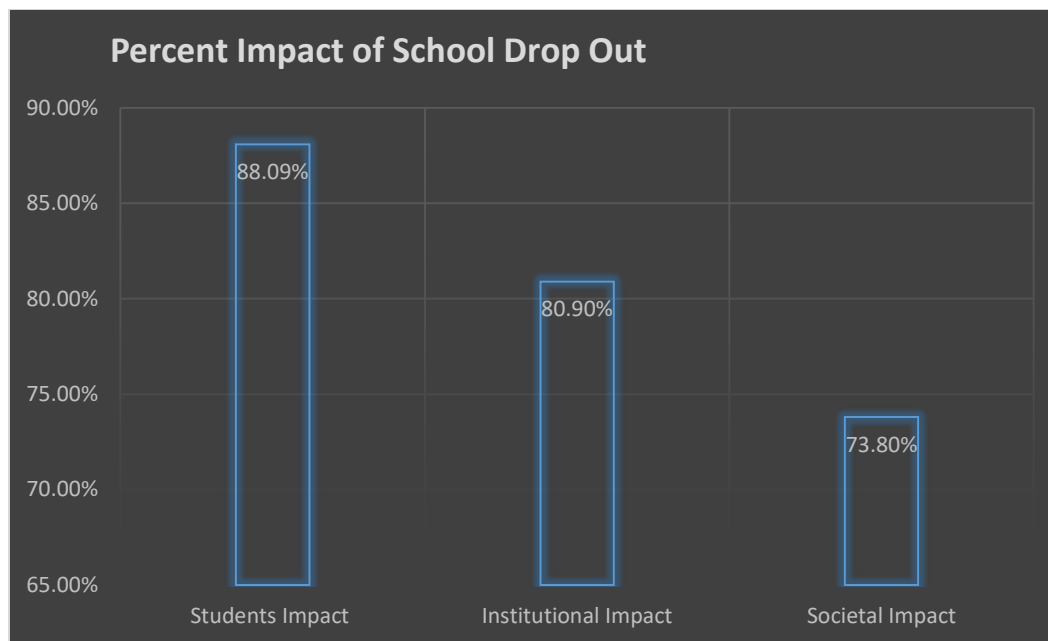
To compare the mean responses of the two independent group of educators from the two schools, a Mann Whitney Wilcoxon Test was also utilized. The level of significance .05 was used to determine if there were significant differences between perceptions of causes for dropout.

Table 4: Mann Whitney scores for Schools 1 and 2

Mann-Whitney Test for Two Independent Samples		
	School 1	School 2
count	23	18
median	5	5.5
rank sum	453	408
U	237	177
	one tail	two tail
alpha	0.05	
U	177	
mean	207	
std dev	37.43211	ties
z-score	0.801451	
effect r	0.125166	
U-crit	145.4297	133.6344
p-value	0.211435	0.422871
sig (norm)	no	no

Using a p value of 0.05, shown is that  $p = 0.211435$  and  $p = 0.211435$ . This illustrates that there is no significant difference among perceptions for causes for school dropout among educators. Additionally, Graph 2 provide insights on educators’ perception of school dropout on students, institution, and society.

Graph 2: Perceptions of Impact on Dropping out of School on Impact to student, institution (School in which teachers teach) and Society

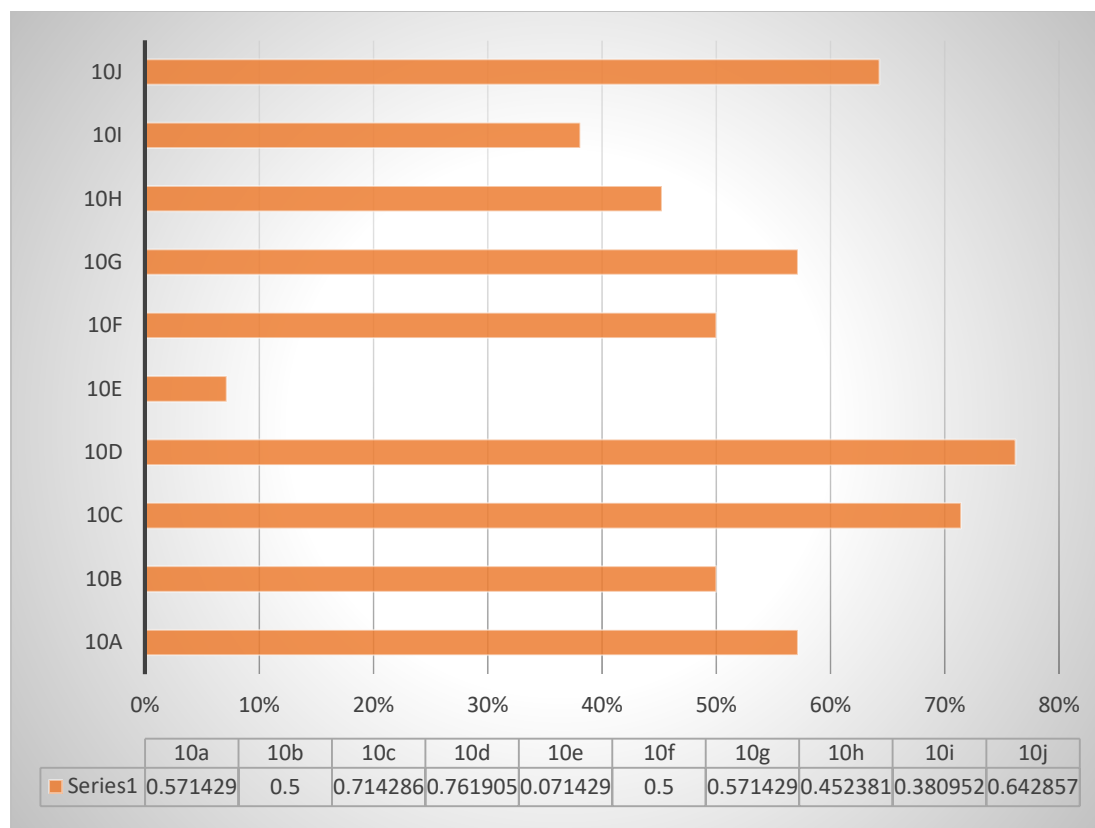


Noted in graph 2 is 73% of the educators are of the view that dropping out of school impacts society while 88% perceived that this has long term impact on students well-being. One educator noted that:

Teacher 5: When students don't make it, we are perceived as the problem. There is the view that teachers are not catering to the students' need. We also receive less funding from the Government because our population become smaller and continuously decrease.

The information in Graph 2 suggests that when students fail to complete their programs of study, it has an effect on their lives and on others. When compared to the response in Graph 1, this shows that even as educators are of the view that remaining in school or dropping out creates no real changes in their communities, they conceded that it impacts schools, society and students. This aligns to a summary report in the U.S. on the effect of school dropout which showed that school dropout affects students' self-esteem and psychological well-being. Students are faced with the reality that they lack skills and knowledge to fulfil their personal and economic needs (Barton, 2005). A further review of the impact of dropout among high school students residing in Southside of Belize is presented in Graph 3.

Graph 3: Factors which Impact Program of Study



Note the key for the code on Graph 3 as follows:

10A - Inadequate preparation for high school level work

10B - Inadequate school supplies

10C - Inadequate financial resources

10D - Inappropriate study skills

10E - First generation to attend college

10F - Socio economic disadvantage

10G - Lack of commitment

10H - Negative peer influence

10I - Mental Health Problems

10J - Emotional Problems

Revealed in Graph 3 is that only 10% of the respondents are of the view that, in most cases, students are impacted by the fact that they are the first in their generation to attend college. Seemingly, teachers perceived that to pursue further education is not a major motivating factor to remain in school. A study by the University of Tübingen with 1,500 ninth grade students and their parents to investigate which family characteristics have a positive effect on academic outcomes and which characteristics can be more of a hindrance showed that generally parental educational background and interest more often than not has no motivating effect on children. This study also revealed that excessive parental involvement may be perceived by students as controlling behaviour. Implied is that parental roles, influence and or background may not positively motivate students to complete their programs of study.

Further illustrated in Graph 3 is that Emotional Problems was rated as 65% for dropping out of school. Suggested is that if students are not emotionally stable or are experiencing some traumatic experience, this may affect the extent to which they complete their program of study. This view is supported by research conducted by School Connectedness (2017) who denote that one effect of lack of school completion is chronic stress. If left untreated, chronic stress can contribute to fear, anxiety, depression, attention and concentration problems, an increase in impulsive or risk-taking behavior and (particularly among boys) hostility, aggression and violence. Each of these



factors alone can hinder educational success, contribute to school dropout and increase disease risk in adulthood. Presenting as a composite, however, only exacerbates their cumulative effects (p.01).

Even as there are multiple causes of dropout among youths enrolled in Southside high schools in Belize City, as shown in Graph 3, lack of study habits was rated as the highest cause for students not completing their programs. The perception that study habits can affect completion was also noted in a study conducted by the University of Georgia in the U.S.A. which concluded that the factors that may lead to a student's decision to leave school are complex; however, two major behaviours are aggression and weak study skills.

A review of 25 years of research by Rumberger & Ah Lim (2008) conclude that there are three inter-related dimensions of educational performance: (1) academic achievement, as reflected in grades and test scores, (2) educational persistence, which reflects whether students remain in the same school or transfer (school mobility) or remain enrolled in school at all (dropout), and (3) educational attainment, which is reflected by progressing in school (e.g., earning credits and being promoted from one grade to another) and completing school by earning of degrees or diplomas. The framework suggests that high school graduation is dependent on both persistence and achievement. That is, students who either interrupt their schooling by dropping out or changing schools, or who have poor academic achievement in school, are less likely to progress in school and to graduate (p.12). This reiterates that school dropout is not influenced by one single factor but a multiplicity of context and underlying personal factors.

## Discussion

Without a doubt, completion rates are paramount if persons living in Belize will over time be skilled to successfully enter the job market. Even as this is the case, there is a significant number of students who should be pursuing and completing secondary schooling that are either out of school, dropping out of school, or engaged in non-productive activities. Some important highlights from the findings point to the perception among educators teaching youths from disadvantaged communities that while education is key to success, it will not bring about significant changes within poverty stricken and high crime rate communities. This perception is aligned to Bandura (1970) notion of response-outcome expectancies. He denotes that an *outcome* expectancy is “a person’s estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes” (p. 193); that is, if students from low socio-economic background are underperforming it may be deemed natural that they will drop out of school and this trend will not bring about progress or any change in their current state of being.

Even if this is true, it is important that educators promote efficacy expectation, which is referred to as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 193). So in the first instance there is need for increase optimism among educators despite social conditions. It is also important for educators and policy makers to ensure that conscious efforts are made for youths to remain in school and lead productive lives. The importance of addressing school dropout was emphasized in a UNICEF (2007) report which documented that forty percent of children in Belize suffer from poverty, preventing them from accessing education, justice, security, and health. These factors must be addressed if vulnerable youths are to be provided with opportunities to become functional members of society

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