



## Social Studies

*Elixir Social Studies* 189 (2025) 55020-55025

**Elixir**  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# High School Dropouts: A Public Health Challenge

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 15 February 2025;

Received in revised form:

20 March 2025;

Accepted: 2 April 2025;

### Keywords

School Dropouts,

Public Health Nurses.

## ABSTRACT

The alarming statistics of school dropouts also have different reasons that need to be studied holistically. The non-completion of high school termination of education can adversely impact health, shorten lifespan, and increase stress on the healthcare system. High school graduation rates have often received extensive analysis and discourse by the Toronto District School Board and the Ministry of Education, however the absence of research and data, the strategies and challenges to improve graduation rates as they relate to public health in a Canadian context is a knowledge gap. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of liaison public health nurses, who worked directly with the Toronto District School Board, regarding influencing students in Toronto, Ontario to complete high school. Bronfenbrenner's development ecological model was the underlying theoretical lens and conceptual framework for the study. The purposive sampling of 10 public health nurses who were interviewed regarding their role and involvement in high schools was the approach adopted to undertake this study. Data was analyzed to gain an understanding of the possible reasons for dropping out from school from the perspective of the interviewed nurses. The findings from this study indicated that liaison public health nurses believed that high school dropouts are a public health issue and that collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Public Health is an ongoing challenge that warrants ongoing attention to address this challenge. The derived recommendations from the analysis of the study data are that the exploration of connection between health and school achievements and the expanded role of public health nurses in Canadian high schools must be more rigorous and ongoing. With continued monitoring and dedicated research and resources to addressing the high dropout in the identified population demographics of school students in Ontario, improving the success of students may be expected.

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## Introduction

It is considered something amiss when a school dropout is witnessed at the individual level at the most innocuous levels of a single student. For then, prompted is a review of the gaps in education, curricula, socioeconomics, and other factors from a student and institution teaching and administrative perception. In this instance, the academic performance slippage and rather the high dropout rates of high school students in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, merited research and study, as the alarm that concerns educators, parents, and the community warrants addressing the challenge to ensure completion of high school, while understanding the barriers and constraints with are contrary to that goal are critical.

The data shows that students who drop out of high school are susceptible to health impairments such as smoking, being overweight, and having a low level of physical activity are often contributing factors (Allensworth et al, 2011; De Ridder et al., 2013). The lack of academic engagement with the early cessation of education can also lead to shorter life spans and increase the stress on welfare and healthcare systems (De Ridder et al., 2013). Public health researchers, Leeves and Soyiri (2015) held that dropout are a key public health issue because of the consequent and invariable association

with poverty and the deficiency in education also contributing to health disparities. Mirow-sky (2017) stressed the importance of education as an important prerequisite to good health, vital in personal development and a clear nexus with healthy lives and good health. Educational achievement is associated with emotional, physical, and economic well-being (Mirow-sky,2017). Educational achievement and successful completion of high school also directly show a relationship to promoting a healthy environment and can serve to lower and eradicating racial and other inequities related to economic growth and societal welfare.

### Background Setting: A Systematic Perspective

It is commendable that the Toronto District School Board has provided excellent public education. The reality is however that certain sections of minorities are more likely to perform poorly in school and are at a higher risk of dropping out. Students who self-identify as Latin American, Black, or of Mixed race, have seen lower graduation rates of 76%, 77%, and 84% respectively. From the data, students with the highest graduation rates identified themselves as East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and White with graduation rates of 96%, 92%, 90%, and 86.2% respectively in the Grade 9 cohort of 2011-2016 (Brown & Tam, 2017).

These figures may indicate that there is a likely problem in the educational system with the way Black students are educated, or how they internalize educational content in the curriculum. Although there are significant improvements in lowering students dropping out, the disparities continue to exist.

### **The Educational Truth**

Education is essential for the success of all members of society. Education is indispensable and in the formative years, helps children discover who they are and set goals so that they can take their place in society (Dei, 1993). Education is a public investment that improves the economy directly and indirectly and can drastically change lives by developing critical thinking skills and knowledge base of individuals (Dei, 1993). Without these skills and the knowledge accrual, high school dropouts are often languishing and are often at a disadvantage in civilization.

Failure to graduate from high school invariably has adverse health, economic, and financial consequences. DeRidder et al. (2013) observed, perhaps correctly, that students who drop out of high school are more likely than their peers to be unemployed, live in poverty or on welfare, or be incarcerated. A further finding was the strong correlation between educational attainment and adult health (De Ridder et al., 2013; Lansford et al., 2016). In financial terms and income generation, Statistics Canada (2015) projected that dropouts make \$23,000 or less per year. The increased volume of high school dropouts, especially among Black students, has become a major social problem with negative effects for students and have adverse societal implications.

The Province of Ontario's total graduation rate has increased dramatically over the past 10 years; however, the dropout rates for Black Toronto students are particularly concerning as the persistent achievement gaps is troublesome. The graduation disparity is that Black students in Toronto have shown a dropout rate that is almost twice that of their White peers, and Black students' graduation rate is 15 percent below that of their White peers (James & Samaroo, 2017). Statistics and research findings have indicated that academic disparities continue to exist in Toronto schools and will persist without strong measures to close the gap and measures such as advocacy, commitment, and outreach between the Toronto District School Board marginalized communities are a dire need.

### **The Assessment and Evaluation of Problem**

From extensive research, the identified problem observed is the high school dropout rates in Toronto, found predominantly low-income families. Although improving overall high school graduation rates have been debated and discussed by the TDSB and the Ministry of Education, there is a lack of research on increased graduation rates as they relate to public health in the Canadian and Province of Ontario setting. With the explicit associations between education and health, administrators, researchers, and policymakers must endeavor to strengthen their understanding of how public health nurses can help to motivate and encourage students to complete high school. Historically, school nurses were responsible for educating high school students on matters of public health. The advantages of having nurses physically present in schools were increased accessibility and have resulted in improved student outcomes. The connection between education and health fostered physical, mental, and educational health among students.

### **Research Aims and Purpose**

A phenomenological qualitative study was undertaken to explore (a) the perceptions of liaison public health nurses in Toronto regarding high school dropouts as a public health issue, and (b) the commitment of liaison PHNs as a key factor to possible interventions. The Greater Toronto Area, Canada, was the location of this research, as there is a high percentage of high school dropouts among minorities, per the findings preceding the primary research of this study.

### **Research Questions**

The principal research questions for this research were:

RQ1: What perceptions do liaison PHN hold regarding the barriers and facilitators that determine a student's ability to complete high school in Toronto, Canada?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of liaison PHNs regarding the role of social networks and online media, and their influence on students' ability to complete high school?

### **The underpinning of the Theoretical Lens**

The Bronfenbrenner (1979) development ecological model was used as a theoretical underpinning and served to guide this phenomenological research, with its underlying relevance to the issues of individuals and the environment. Bronfenbrenner introduced the model in the 1970s, claiming that human development depends on complex reciprocal interactions between persons or objects in the immediate environment (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Sallis et al., 2015). The postulations of the development ecological model denote a multifaceted expanded realm of influences that shape social identity (Sallis, et al., 2015). These realms and spheres consist of the microsystem, which centers on individuals who shape their identities through personal beliefs and behaviors gained from close contacts or associations (Sallis et al., 2015).

The data indicated on graduation rates, that racial minority groups, particularly Blacks and Latino students have higher rates of dropout compared to White students, and in areas where there is a large focus of poor ethnic minorities, the challenge is significant (Maynard et al., 2015). For the general population, high school dropouts have been improving significantly but for young Canadian Blacks, completing high school continues to be a dispute. The findings from a survey revealed that for the year 2006-2007, suspension rates were highest among Aboriginal students, followed by Black and Mixed students, with one in every seven Black Grade 7 and 8 students reported being suspended at least once compared to everyone in every 20 White students in similar grade levels. The data was available from a human rights complaint settlement that required the TDSB to collect and analyze race-based suspensions in 2006-2007. Since that time, there have not appeared to be reports available to the public.

These statistics, when revealed to educators, researchers, parents, media, and the public, caused concern and dismay. In response to community requests, the TDSB authorized the proposition to launch the first Afrocentric Alternative School in Grades K – 5 and grew in 2012 to accommodate up to Grade 8 students. The TDSB hoped that this school would begin to bring about change in the education of Canadian Black children. The curriculum aided in addressing achievement disparities between whites and minorities, student disengagement, dropout issues, and approaches to inspire Black youth. Various recommendations were implemented in Toronto schools and the TDSB Grade 9 cohort Fall 2006-11 confirmed a slight improvement of 35%

dropout rate among Black students. Multiple factors were attributed to underachievement and school dropouts. Some of these contributing factors will be addressed more extensively herein.

### **Study Research Method and Design Rationale for Appropriateness**

This research study entailed a qualitative method with a phenomenological design invoked to further understand behaviors and attitudes regarding a phenomenon and sought to provide explanations. The research subjects were liaison participants and were purposively selected from a pool of PHNs in this study. The participants were interviewed to elicit personal perceptions regarding high school dropouts, education, the impact on health, and their opinions on public health involvement in addressing the issue. The interview questions were open-ended in nature to aid exploration and use words or actions to explain a phenomenon. Open-ended questions are conducive for the researcher to gather in-depth information from respondents. Qualitative research also involves the analysis of the interviews as the study participants express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences from their perspectives. It is incumbent upon the qualitative researcher to be thorough and accurate to capture and understand the raw data as the study participants present it and one way that this is done effectively is through open-unrestricted questions in the form of intense interviews. Munhall (2012) stated qualitative research is flexible since it encourages the researcher to be innovative but has some critics frowning and viewing it as unscientific, too personal, and full of biases.

### **The Synthesis of Qualitative and Phenomenological Method and Design**

The phenomenological research design is conducive to identifying the meaning of human experiences (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Polit & Beck, 2014). This approach and design involve putting aside personal attitudes and beliefs and allowing the researcher to see the phenomenon from the perspectives of the persons who have experienced it. The invocation of a phenomenological research design is beneficial to describing and understanding the lived experiences of the individuals, rather than explaining them (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Polit & Beck, 2014). This design is appropriate when the aim is not to focus on specific steps but rather for study participants to share lived experiences and thereby contribute to the exploration of the phenomenon and a deeper understanding of it from their proximity to the phenomenon.

This research was undertaken in the Greater Toronto region, as is with the highest incidence of high school dropouts and therefore gaining a better understanding of the liaison PHNs' perceptions concerning high suited to school dropout prevention was important. The data collection for this qualitative phenomenological study was by conducting interviews. In qualitative studies, intensive interviews are considered the main source of rich primary data collection for qualitative study as they serve to uncover detailed, rich responses without contamination (Turner, 2010). The participants were liaison public health nurses who have worked with Toronto high schools. These liaison PHNs who are assigned to schools are knowledgeable in community development, health promotion, illness and injury prevention, and primary health care.

The research study participant request and solicitation were printed in English and distributed to PHNs through

work email. Participants who responded to the invitation and were willing to share personal experiences openly and honestly were contacted by email to arrange the interview. Informed consent forms were signed and collected before the start of the interview. All respondents were informed that they were under no obligation to complete the interview and could terminate the interview at any time without any adverse consequence of any kind. Liaison PHNs were given dates and times for the interview with the option and flexibility to choose other times and locations for their convenience.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the data collection process and management techniques were completed, the data analysis process commenced. Microsoft Excel was used in coding and organizing the data in a manageable way. A code number was assigned to each participant on the spreadsheet and responses to each question were input under the corresponding number that was assigned. The steps in facilitated categorizing and assembling the data by reading through each response and identifying descriptive words, themes, or new ideas. Coding can differ from one person to another since qualitative research is somewhat of an interpretive method. Taylor and Gibbs (2010) defined coding as the process of combining data for themes, ideas, and categories for comparison and analysis. The process of data organization is vital since it facilitates exploration of the phenomenon, and comparison as well as enables the identification of patterns requiring further analysis. The major themes emerging from the analysis of the interviews were manually categorized and coded for easier analysis, in keeping with Giorgi's (1985) stages of analysis, which were adopted for this study.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of liaison PHNs hold regarding the barriers and facilitators that contribute to determining a student's ability to complete high school in Toronto, Canada? From the analysis of the interviews, the following key themes emerged: Participants indicated that lack of resources, mental health, not feeling connected, deviant behaviors, hopelessness, stress at home and school, lack of parental involvement, lack of family support, lack of mentorship, poverty, and social media were some barriers that contributed to students' ability to complete high school. Participants implied that stability, mentorship, decreased stress, family support, and a good school environment facilitate school completion.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of liaison PHNs regarding the role of social networks and online media, and their influence on students' ability to complete high school? From responses to research question 2, the following themes emerged: Improper use can lead to distraction from schoolwork, increased mental health issues, online bullying, false perception, and increased pressure on students to fit into different categories.

Most study participants indicated that social media if used correctly can enhance learning and improve critical thinking. It is important to note that nine participants mentioned that social media can influence high school completion, but one respondent did not feel that social media could affect high school completion. Although the usage of social media is a relatively more recent phenomenon, the association with the ecological model was noted as the model identifies that social environmental factors help shape adolescent problem behavior (Driessens, 2015). Analyzing the data with these constructs as a guide facilitated a more in-

depth approach in identifying themes that emerged throughout the analysis process.

### **Analysis of Responses to Research Question 1**

The interview questions for research question 1 were: What are the perceptions of liaison PHNs hold regarding the barriers and facilitators that contribute to determine a student's ability to complete high school in Toronto, Canada? This relates to the Bronfenbrenner development ecological model that postulates strong parent-adolescent relationships, supportive family, and positive social interactions lead to positive outcomes in high school students (Driessens, 2015). Similarly, Trach et al. (2019) review extensively outlined how poverty impacts academic and socio emotional functioning. Participant views seemed in consonance with the model and cited the above views.

### **Perceived Barriers**

All 10 study participants stated that they believed poverty, mental health, poor role models, lack of parental involvement, lack of school support, defiant behaviors, and hopelessness were some of the main barriers to completing high school. Three of the participants indicated language barriers and learning disabilities. One participant mentioned immigration status and teachers who might have their own biases and push the students to achieve. Participant 7 described that the "lack of mentorship in and out of the household, lack of high expectations, household strife, and low income leads individuals to enter the workforce early to help the family with financial needs." Participant 1 explained that social media and culture are sometimes barriers to completing high school. This individual further explained that, for new immigrants, not knowing how to navigate the Canadian education system can be difficult for families. When addressing the second part of the question, all ten study participants indicated that students need motivation, support at home, determination, good role models, parental partnership with the school, and good teachers to be successful in high school. Participant 4 provided this information:

Having engaging teachers/programs, strong social networks/support both at home and school, feeling connected to the school community, and having adequate nutrition, sleep, and physical activity are necessary to perform well in school. Also, having skills to cope with the stress of school and being a teenager, and resiliency are key to completing high school.

Participant 7 further detailed, that "Social support and mentorship, vision for future, valuing education beyond completing high school level, career goals or vision, in some instances, income support for transportation, food, school supplies are most important." Participant 5 agreed that "Parent involvement and taking interest in their child's success, and strong community support are needed for student success."

### **Investigation of Research Question 2**

The interview question for research question 2 were: What are the perceptions of liaison PHNs regarding the role of social networks and online media, and their influence on students' ability to complete high school? The following key emergent themes are connoted that social media harms self-esteem, instant gratification, and cyberbullying. These themes were in close relation to the development ecological model which asserted that microsystems such as family, peers, and schools can directly influence adolescents' development, however, some social interchanges can result in disruptive

behavioral problems during secondary schools (Driessens, 2015).

### **Social Media**

The research results revealed that the study participants thought that social media and other online media outlets could influence persuade students to complete high school. Nine out of ten participants stated that social media could be positive or negative. Participant 1 clarified, "If social media is used properly students can have the ability to get quick information, connect with learning groups, and another educational system that can make learning convenient and improve learning needs."

Participant 2 also justified, "It could hurt self-esteem because social media tends to inflate things and students may think that they can do the same things to make fast money." Participant 4 also explained, "social media has glorified instant gratification, and some may choose to not complete high school in hopes of becoming rich/famous through social media platforms (i.e., becoming Instagram models or social media influencers), also social media has been shown to negatively impact student's mental health as there are constant images of 'perfect people living these perfect lives' and students may feel less than adequate."

Participant 6 explained, "I feel social media could be a distraction to students completing high because some students cannot regulate themselves and spend too much time engaging in online activities."

Four out of 10 participants mentioned that, with the rise of social media, cyberbullying can negatively impact students' mental health and that some students may feel unsafe, and unwelcomed, and this can impact academic performance and lead to school dropout issues. Participant 7 was just the only participant who stated, "I do not view social media as a factor influencing high school completion. Social media is a communication medium." However, when asked about social media hindering or enhancing learning, she explained, "Social media platforms can be used as a means for social connection and finding networks of people you can relate with. It is also a tool that can be used to gain knowledge, thus enhancing learning." All ten of the study participants stated that social media can hinder or enhance learning. Participant 1 stated that to social media as a "double-edged sword" but was more concerned about the increase in cyberbullying and mental health issues that were associated with the impact of social media.

### **Perceived Study Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that it comprised of a purposeful sampling of Liaison PHNs who were all females. This sampling approach may have limited the study to a small group of participants that might share similar traits and characteristics which could lead to potential sampling bias. To address these biases, participants were recruited outside of my region's locality, and a professional and unbiased relationship was established for the research. Another limitation of this qualitative phenomenological approach is that the findings of this research study may not be generalizable to other PHNs populations.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

There appears to be a deficit of empirical studies conducted in Canada to make broader generalization in this regard. The research findings from this study have revealed that further Canadian research is needed that explores the connection between health and school successes.

Future qualitative and quantitative research should be undertaken, with a focus on adults who have not completed high school. These researchers led studies should explore issues such as involvement in crimes, using illicit drugs, and health status. The findings of this study revealed that PHNs believe that adults who have not completed high school are at higher risks of being involved in crimes, and poor health, therefore warrant further research in this area. In addition to these studies, completing research that addresses improving graduation rates could provide insights into health professionals and educators to improve the lives of young people.

A recommendation for further research to understand and address high school dropouts as a public health issue in Canada is warranted, as may serve to develop a team approach to address the decrease in graduation rates in areas of lower socioeconomic status. The findings of this study may contribute to the strategies for educating policymakers vis-à-vis the long-term benefits of education, in respect of its potential and positive role for the health of the community.

### Conclusion

The research was with the aim of exploring (a) the perceptions of liaison public health nurses in Toronto regarding high school dropouts as a public health issue, and (b) the involvement of liaison PHNs as a key component to possible interventions. The Bronfenbrenner's ecological model served as a theoretical grounding to underpin the study and guided the development and framing of the research questions, and the interview data were coded to the constructs of the ecological model. The construct was used to support participants' belief that students were connected to the environment directly or indirectly, and that lack of education, overtime, influences an individual's development and health.

The important findings from this qualitative research study revealed that liaison PHNs believed that there is a strong link between education and health and that promoting health in schools is significant for a healthy community. The discernment efforts in this research brought to focus and also highlighted various gaps as well as interventions that could have liaison PHNs more involved in capacities where they would be able to affect policy changes.

Several researchers have shown a correlation between education and health. The extensive review of studies here indicated that students who do not complete high school are more likely to have higher rates of illnesses, have employment problems, die prematurely, engage in high-risk behaviors, and are more likely to depend on social assistance programs. Study participants' views were like the findings of several studies, notably that improving high school graduation rates could indirectly improve the health of the community and reduce health disparities.

Although the Province of Ontario has universal health care and homecare, PHNs in schools work in multidisciplinary teams with other community partners, schools, and public health departments to address the health concerns of students, families, and community members. Liaison PHNs also expressed interest in a more expanded role that would see PHNs in schools on a full-time basis consistently supporting mental, physical, social, and emotional health as well as addressing factors that prevent a student from completing high school.

Participants strenuously indicated that social media can be a positive force in learning but the negative impact in the form of cyberbullying can affect students' ability to learn

which eventually led to failure to complete high school. The findings of this study substantiated the research previously conducted by Espelage and Hong (2017) that are increasingly exposed to other forms of bullying, specifically cyberbullying which is associated with depression, anxiety, high-risk behavior, suicide, and other health issues. The findings of this study may also validate previous findings that identified bullying as a barrier to learning which can lead to absenteeism which can be addressed by having public health nurses in schools.

Canada has recognized cyberbullying as a social problem which Espelage and Hong (2017) concurred with and added that it is also a public health issue. Liaison PHNs have not only expressed concern regarding this trend but have expressed the need for liaison PHNs to take a more active role in addressing health issues associated with cyberbullying in schools. To be more effective, participants believe that The Ministry of Health needs more collaboration with the Ministry of Education to discuss policy changes that specifically address the above issues.

Liaison PHNs in Toronto have provided the school community with exceptional care, leadership, and service however, having PHNs assigned to every school in Toronto would ensure that counseling, assessment, and support of high-risk students would be addressed promptly. Through expanded roles, PHNs in schools could help to build therapeutic relationships with students, build trust, and advocate for comprehensive action plans to improve health and reduce disparities. The findings from this study revealed that liaison PHNs indicated clearly that collaboration between health and education professionals is necessary to address high school dropouts as a public health issue. A concerted effort to improve the graduation rate will not only benefit students directly but also contribute to promoting a cost-effective means of reducing racial and economic disparities and improving the individual health of school going and other populations.

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