

CHRONIC STUDENT ABSENTEEISM:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

BY

KELLY KATHLEEN SCULLES

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Richard Hunter, Chair
Professor Kern Alexander
Professor Marilyn Johnston-Parsons
Professor Carolyn Shields
Clinical Assistant Professor Linda Sloat

Abstract

Consistent school attendance is critical if students are to build and maintain a foundation for ongoing learning and academic success throughout life. When students are not in attendance, they miss essential instruction, which often times cannot be replicated. They miss the incidental learning that takes place during classroom discussion. Further, research suggests chronic student absenteeism is prevalent in the United States and Europe. Research also links the presence of chronic student absenteeism to more complex problems later in adulthood. This phenomenological study describes the experiences of five middle school students identified with chronic student absenteeism from a purposefully selected middle school. Through a reflective interview process the study sought to “hear the silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism, along with the voices of their parents and/or guardians. The findings indicate the risk factors associated with student absenteeism across the five middle school students are associated with those described in previous research. Further, the findings point to the importance of student and parent and/or guardian voice within schools. Recommendations for school leaders faced with addressing student attendance concerns include going beyond eliciting student voice by taking a critical approach to leadership within the schools; recognizing the importance of building relationships and limiting assumptions. Further, it is recommended that future research take a closer look at student attendance at the elementary school level, dig deeper into the interconnectedness of the risk factors impacting student attendance, and consider the power of student and parent and/or guardian voice in developing educational practices and policies.

Dedicated to my many cheerleaders and supporters; ranging in age from three to 93.

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Chapter One: Framework for the Study

Each year, school leaders in K-12 public education are faced with the complex challenge of addressing student absenteeism concerns. In addressing such concerns, their actions are often confined by a district's unwritten, historical practices and formal attendance policies. An extensive review of the literature points to a vast number of attendance practices and policies which perpetuate non-attendance problems by blaming and punishing students, thus resulting in increased absences (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; García-Gracia, 2008; Hartnett, 2007). However, there is limited research to suggest school leaders are seeking input from their students as they look to improve student attendance. This practice is inconsistent with the pool of research that suggests students must be given the opportunity to be heard, listened to, and recognized for their contributions to their education (Cook-Sather, 2006; Gunter & Thomson, Sands et al., 2007; Smyth, 2006b; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009).

Drawing on literature centered on chronic student absenteeism and literature related to student voice, I developed an argument for the need to hear from and understand student perspectives related to their absenteeism, along with the perspectives of their parents and/or guardians. I sought to explore the role of school leaders in understanding and responding to such perspectives when addressing student absenteeism concerns. Through this research, it has been my intent to help school leaders to be better equipped to assist students in building and maintaining a foundation for ongoing learning and academic success through consistent participation in the K-12 public education system.

Theoretical Basis of the Research

As the researcher, I explored chronic student absenteeism through a critical lens, shaped in part by critical pedagogy and a critical approach to leadership, both of which I further explored in chapter two. Critical pedagogy looks to a deeper understanding of the world (Burbules & Beck, 1999; Giroux & Simon, 1988; Kincheloe, 2005; Monchinski, 2008). A critical approach to leadership provides students with the opportunity to be heard and for their perspectives to be taken into consideration. Further, a critical approach to leadership opens the door for those who have been oppressed or marginalized to tell their story.

I used a critical lens as I sought to understand the research participants. Most importantly, the middle school students identified with chronic student absenteeism. I sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of such students, along with the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians through a reflective interview process. Through the use of reflective questions, I provided the research participants with the opportunity to construct their own meaning as they engaged in the world. I provided the students and their parents and/or guardians with an avenue to which they were allowed and encouraged to share their stories, as I sought to understand and respond to their experiences (Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, 2007, p. 341).

It was my intent to ensure the voices of the students identified with chronic student absenteeism, along with the voices of their parents and/or guardians were heard. I sought to have the students and parents feel as if they were collaborators and problem solvers alongside their school leaders in addressing student absenteeism concerns.

Background and Statement of the Problem

Educators have argued consistent school attendance is critical if students are to build and maintain a foundation for ongoing learning and academic success throughout life (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). In order to maximize students' learning potential, it is imperative they attend school, which for most in American K-12 public education is a required 40 hours per week. When students are not in attendance, they miss essential instruction which often times cannot be replicated. They miss what might be best described as the incidental learning that takes place through ongoing conversation and dialogue in the classroom setting. "Students who are not in class have fewer opportunities to learn the material that enables them to succeed later in school," (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 308).

Furthermore, the educational experiences of those students who attend school regularly are impacted when educators are forced to turn their attention to those students who have missed extensive periods of time (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid 2008b). "Whilst non-attenders are a minority of the school population, they can have an adverse effect on other pupils and teachers themselves. Their attitudes and learning deficits can divert teachers' attention..." (Reid, 2008b, p. 346).

Although researchers across disciplines have pointed to the inconsistency in how districts track student absences, there has been evidence to suggest chronic student absenteeism and truancy are prevalent in K-12 education (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; García-Gracias, 2008; Reid 2008a; Wilkins, 2008). So much so, that "the prevalence of problematic absenteeism is greater than most childhood mental disorders" (Kearney, 2008, p. 258). "Daily student absenteeism rates vary substantially across schools and have been reported as high as 30% in some cities" (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 224). Specific to the United States "nearly

10% of students enrolled in public schools are absent daily” (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 223). Further, between one and 5% of all school children are considered non-attenders (Pellegrini, 2007).

Researchers have suggested chronic student absenteeism leads to greater problems, and the authors of one study went so far as to argue, “Schools should recognize [student] absenteeism for any reason as a warning sign for risk behavior participation” (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 226).

Research has also indicated chronic student absenteeism leads to more serious problems including violence, substance abuse, poor academic performance, risky sexual behavior, and teenage pregnancy (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Eaton et al., 2008; Henry, 2007; Kearney, 2008). In addition, a high level of student absenteeism places students at risk for permanent dropout from school, which can lead to more significant problems later in adulthood – economic deprivation, marital difficulties, and in some cases incarceration (Kearney, 2008; Wilkins, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism at a purposefully selected middle school. Specifically, the study explored the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism among five middle school students. The study looked closely at the experiences and perspectives of the students identified with chronic absenteeism along with the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians related to such absenteeism. The study also explored the role of school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and perspectives as they address student absenteeism concerns.

Research Questions

The phenomenological study was designed to explore the following questions:

- How do middle school students perceive and describe their absenteeism?
- How do their parents and/or guardians perceive and describe such absenteeism?
- What are the school attendance policies and practices?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in implementing the policies?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in responding to student and parent perspectives?

Consistent with other qualitative researchers, I allowed for needed refinement by responding to the need to “change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 43). Specifically, when meeting with the student and parent and/or guardian participants, my questions were shaped by the stories they shared about their lived experience. Further, I was responsive to the requests of two of the students by allowing them to participate in their follow up interviews with their parent and/or guardian.

Rationale Statement

Through a critical review of the literature, I looked to gaps or shortcomings within the research to support my rationale for conducting a phenomenological study focused on the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism. I built upon previous research conducted in high schools by focusing on chronic student absenteeism in the middle school setting, as I saw a need to address student attendance issues long before students enter high school. By addressing student absences at an earlier age, I believe students would be at less risk for chronic absenteeism, truancy, and dropping out of school.

Furthermore, I saw value in exploring chronic student absenteeism through the lens of

students, as a recent body of literature suggested, all too often student perspectives are overlooked or even ignored when establishing and implementing daily practices and policies. As previously noted, research has also pointed to a number of attendance policies that perpetuate non-attendance by blaming and punishing students, thus resulting in increased absences (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; García-Gracia, 2008; Hartnett, 2007). Specifically, a number of school leaders have been identified as having responded to student absences in a reactive manner, rather than a proactive manner (García-Gracia, 2008). “Historically, schools have addressed issues of [absenteeism] and truancy by blaming individual students” (Hartnett, 2007, p. 41), thus supporting my rationale for exploring the role of school leaders in seeking and understanding the conditions which contribute to student absenteeism.

Situated Self

“Phenomenology begins with the personal, the subjective world in which you are present, a part of, and connected to in your own situated context, life worlds, and different contingencies, which all contribute to you as a person” (Munhall, 2012, p. 148). Therefore, as the researcher, I have reflected on my own life experience and acknowledged how and why I was drawn to understanding the central phenomenon of student absenteeism.

Over the course of my tenure as an educational administrator, I have taken a greater interest in understanding how student attendance practices and policies relate to student needs. My increased interest came as a direct result of the challenges I have faced in supporting educators in responding to and addressing student absenteeism, while attending to district practices and policies.

My personal experience has caused me to question whether or not district practices and policies lead to increased student attendance or further perpetuate student absenteeism.

Consequently, I considered this study as an opportunity to take an in-depth look at chronic student absenteeism and to apply my learning related to critical pedagogy, a critical approach to leadership, and student voice, as they relate to addressing student absenteeism.

Overview of the Research Design

As the researcher, I conducted a qualitative study, employing phenomenology as my strategy of inquiry. Phenomenology allowed me to take a reflective stance as I sought to understand the lived experiences of those individuals impacted by chronic student absenteeism. Specifically, phenomenology assisted me in understanding the “essence” (Flood, 2010, p. 13) of the research participants’ experiences as I sought to understand the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism. In understanding the essence, I contend it is not

the outcome of interpretation, [and] it is not [me, as] the researcher who gives a phenomenon its meaning. Neither is the essence something that lies within the realm of the object itself, ready to describe. Instead the meaning is disclosed in the researching act that takes place between the researcher and the phenomenon. In this context, it is interesting to note the word “phenomenon” means “things as intended.” Essence thus belongs to the in-between world, that “single fabric” that connects us with everything else in the world, with other subjects or objects. (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 12)

I sought to “hear the silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) of students identified with chronic student absenteeism in a purposefully selected middle school, along with the voices of their parents and/or guardians through multiple interviews. Further, I interviewed twelve school leaders, as identified by the building principal of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism. It was my intent to better understand the role of the school leaders in understanding and responding to the experiences and perspectives of their students, parents, and/or guardians as they address student absenteeism concerns.

I began, as Moustakas (1994) suggested by engaging in “a social conversation...aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). I encouraged active participation in the

interview process through the use of open-ended, interview questions supported by probing, clarifying questions, and paraphrasing of the research participants' comments. As I listened, I laughed, I was brought to tears, and I was not surprised to find that many of the interviews went beyond our expected 30 to 40 minutes. I allowed the research participants' stories to come to life, as I took observational notes and digitally recorded all but one interview.

Upon completion of the student, parent and/or guardian, and school leader interviews, I reviewed my descriptive, observational notes and the transcriptions from the digital recordings of the interviews. As the researcher, I engaged in the “perplexing exercise of trying to make sense of the data” (Creswell, 2007, p. 43). I used an approach known as interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as I reviewed the data for the purpose of making meaning. I sought to elicit themes through the essence and experience of the research participants. In doing so, I found myself reflecting on the environment in which the interviews took place and the emotion that came through the interview participants' words.

Using a reflective, critical lens, I formed interpretations as I in the end, aimed to provide support to school leaders who are faced with responding to student absenteeism. By using a critical lens, I thought critically about the information obtained throughout the interview process, while exploring the possibilities for improved practice as they related to a critical approach to leadership.

Definition of Terms

Student absenteeism – Over the years, psychologists, social/criminal justice experts, educators, medical experts, and other researchers have studied school absenteeism. While absenteeism has been studied across disciplines, the literature has suggested there is some discrepancy in how related terminologies are defined and used. Therefore, throughout the study,

it was important to have a common understanding of non-attendance and student absenteeism.

Kearney (2008) suggested:

A satisfactory definition of problematic absenteeism must account for all aspects of nonattendance...and be practical enough for use by researchers, clinicians, educators, and others. As such, problematic absenteeism could refer to school-aged youths who (1) have missed at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks, (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least 2 weeks with significant interference in a child's or family's daily routine, and/or (3) are absent for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15% of days absent from school). (p. 265)

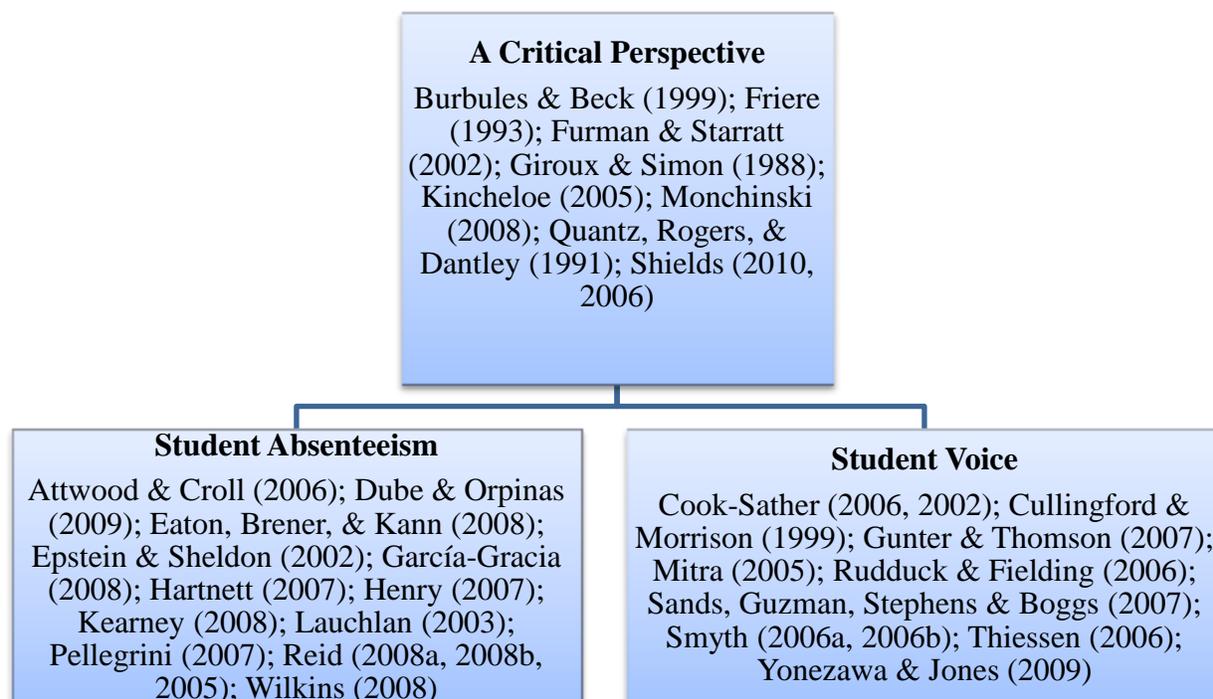
For this study, I adopted the third definition as described by Kearney (2008), while referring to absenteeism as chronic, rather than problematic. I preferred the term chronic as it describes something as recurring. On the contrary, I saw problematic as taking on a negative connotation, suggesting and/or assuming something is questionable or related to a problem. As the researcher, I believed it was imperative to limit my assumptions about absenteeism, while encouraging my readers to do the same.

Middle school – Drawing on the frameworks from the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP), Andrews, Caskey, and Anfara (2007) ascertained the following characteristics constitute a successful middle school for students age 10 to 15:

Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory; instruction that connects directly to curriculum and instruction to promote learning; relationships between and among adults and students that advance both academic and affective student development, quality teaching and a supportive school environment; educators who value working with young adolescents and are specifically prepared to do so; courageous and collaborative leadership characterized by a shared vision that guides decisions and high expectations for all; health and wellness policies and programs that ensure young adolescents have the structures and supports they need to thrive; and family and community partnerships that facilitate communication and provide multiple avenues for involvement.

Overview of the Literature

As the researcher, I explored student absenteeism and student voice through a lens shaped in part by critical pedagogy and a critical approach to leadership, as represented in the following visual illustration:



Not only was the intent of the included literature map to “help others visualize how the study related to the larger literature on the topic,” it also assisted me as I began to explore and “understand how the topic added to, extended, or replicated [previous] research” (Creswell, 2003, p. 39).

Limitations and Delimitations

As the researcher, I anticipated multiple, inherent weaknesses to conducting a phenomenological study. Such weaknesses were more formally described as limitations (Creswell, 2003, p. 148). Limitations were those factors that were inherent to the design that I as the researcher could not control.

As the researcher, I found it difficult to gain consent from the students identified with chronic student absenteeism and their parents and/or guardians. While 75 students met the criteria to participate in the study, only five students and families came forward. This could, in part, be because those identified were not able to participate in the study and/or may not have been available to participate due to transiency, schedule conflicts, or other identified factors. In addition, I suspect a number of the students and their parents and/or guardians may not have been willing to talk about their comfort and success, or lack thereof, related to their experience with the middle school. Particularly with someone they did not know.

As evidenced throughout the interview process, the student participants did not appear to be equally articulate and reflective throughout the interview process (Creswell, 2003, p. 186). In addition, the use of open-ended interview questions presented as a limitation in that the questions allowed for multiple interpretations and open-ended sharing on behalf of the student, parent and/or guardian, and school leader research participants.

As the researcher, I was faced with multiple delimitations, which are those factors I could control. By choosing to conduct a phenomenological study in which I explored the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism, I narrowed the scope of my research which is considered to be a delimitation (Creswell, 2003, p. 148). Further, I made conscious inclusionary and exclusionary decisions about the sample of research participants. I delimited my research by focusing on those students identified with chronic absenteeism from one middle school in an urban community. I also delimited my study by choosing not to explore the role of teachers while I explored the experiences and perspectives of students identified with chronic student absenteeism and the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians, along with the role of their school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and

perspectives when addressing student absenteeism.

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study provided insight into the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism through the voice of students, who as supported by research have often been silenced. “One voice seems eerily silent – the voice of the child” (Sands et al., 2007, p. 341). Further, this study moved beyond current research by focusing on student absenteeism at the middle, rather than high school level, with the intent to address attendance concerns at an earlier age. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of students identified with chronic student absenteeism, the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians, and the role of their school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and perspectives, the study opened the door to contributions toward future attendance practices and policies, which should, in turn, improve student attendance.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

As the researcher, I reviewed literature centered on critical pedagogy, a critical approach to leadership, student absenteeism, and student voice as I set out to answer the following research questions:

- How do middle school students perceive and describe their absenteeism?
- How do their parents and/or guardians perceive and describe such absenteeism?
- What are the school attendance policies and practices?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in implementing the policies?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in responding to student and parent perspectives?

As a means to understand student absenteeism and to bring awareness to the importance of student voice, I began by exploring critical pedagogy and a critical approach to leadership. I then discussed the scholarly literature related to chronic student absenteeism with an emphasis on the roles of and implications for school leaders, while developing an argument for the need to hear from and understand student perspectives.

Critical Pedagogy

The lens through which I as the researcher conducted this study was shaped, in part, by critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy, as suggested by Kincheloe (2005) is grounded in critical theory, thus I began by turning to the theoretical work of Freire (1993). He suggested, “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Freire, 1993, p. 178). Freire spoke out against such top-down leaders. He feared by micromanaging and imposing their decisions on others they slowly shut them down, discouraging them from being

heard. Freire encouraged leaders to seek out the voices of those who have been oppressed; those who Shields (2006) described as individuals from different race, class, culture, gender, and language backgrounds. Often times, those who have been oppressed or marginalized do not offer their thinking or insight, thus pointing to the importance of a critical approach to leadership that fosters an environment which encourages dialogue.

Beyond the school leader, Freire encouraged students to think critically about their education. Further, as a means toward continuous improvement, he suggested educators work to understand student experience through rich dialogue and exploration. Rich dialogue and exploration with students opens the door to a deepened understanding of their needs, leading to thoughtful decision making. It sets the stage for students to participate in decision making that impacts their everyday life in school. I believe Freire's work related to critical theory is relevant in that it connected to my exploration of the role of educational leaders in promoting student voice.

Going beyond theory, critical pedagogy looks to a deeper understanding of the everyday world (Burbules & Beck, 1999; Giroux & Simon, 1988; Kincheloe, 2005; Monchinski, 2008). Giroux and Simon (1988) suggested, "The notion of critical pedagogy begins with a degree of indignation, a vision of possibility, and an uncertainty that demands that we constantly rethink and renew the work we have done as part of a wider theory of schooling" (p. 25). Critical pedagogy has pointed to the need for reflection and renewal in practice for the greater good. Critical pedagogy takes individuals beyond theory into practice, taking into account the everyday world. Giroux and Simon (1988) viewed the "politics of indifference and power as the basis for developing a critical pedagogy through and for the voices of those who are often silenced" (p. 10). By empowering individuals who have been marginalized or silenced, Giroux and Simon

(1988) like other critical theorists believed they can transform existing social inequities and injustices. Giving voice to those who have been silenced empowers them to make a difference in their everyday lives. Critical pedagogy seeks to empower students (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 5). In particular, critical pedagogy empowers students to take charge of their existence and to help shape their surroundings. This view is relevant in that it further connected to my exploration of the role of educational leaders in promoting student voice.

A Critical Approach to Leadership

A critical approach to leadership not only provides opportunities for students to be heard, but also takes their perspectives into consideration. Such leadership allows those who have often been marginalized to be recognized as contributing members of the learning community. A critical approach to leadership allows “all voices and arguments to be heard regardless of race, class, and gender” (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991, p. 96). Students are not limited by their race, class, gender, and life experience. They are recognized for the diversity they bring to the school setting; they are celebrated as individuals whose unique life experience is honored. A critical approach to leadership “acknowledges multiple realities, while at the same time, never ignoring individual needs,” (Shields, 2006, p. 73).

A critical approach to leadership goes beyond the status quo by recognizing the need for refined and renewed practices, shaped by stakeholders beyond the school leader. This requires leaders to “help others to clarify their own world, to develop a commitment to democracy and emancipation, and to have the courage and desire to work for the empowerment of all people” (Quantz et al., 1991, p. 104).

A critical approach to leadership allows for all stakeholders to “become involved in dialogue designed for self-articulation, dialogue aimed at helping participants gain a critical

understanding of their lives both in and outside of school” (Quantz et al., 1991, p. 111). Furman and Starratt (2002) suggested a school’s inclusive dialogue allows all individuals, even those who have been marginalized to share their lived experience. A critical approach to leadership sets the stage for individuals to make sense of their experiences. Shields (2006) suggested dialogue is both a way of living and leading (p. 77).

Further, a critical approach to leadership requires a leader to think critically and to believe in the possibility of change (Quantz et al., 1991; Shields, 2010). Shields (2010) asserted this level of “critique lays the groundwork for the promise of schooling that is more inclusive, democratic, and equitable for more students” (p. 570). Certainly, the possibility for students to be heard, rather than silenced is more likely in an environment that is more inclusive, democratic, and equitable, as Shields (2010) suggests. A critical approach to leadership provides a framework for a change in practice for the good of all stakeholders. Therefore, confirming the value and importance of taking a critical approach to leadership when promoting student voice.

Student Absenteeism

Over the years, psychologists, social/criminal justice experts, educators, medical experts, and other researchers have studied student absenteeism, with some suggesting it is difficult to define. While studies across the aforementioned disciplines offer similar findings, I found some discrepancy across literature in how related terminologies are defined and used.

Psychologists tend to use terms such as school phobia, separation anxiety, school refusal, and school refusal behavior when describing absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). School phobia can be described as absenteeism driven by fears, which are often times linked to a circumstance within the school setting. For example, a student experiencing school phobia may have a fear of being separated from his or her class for a period of time or a fear related to a pending safety alarm or

drill. Separation anxiety often stems from the fear of being away from a parent or caregiver. Students experiencing separation anxiety may often times come to school but return home, because they are challenged by leaving the side of their parent or caregiver when they enter the school. School refusal and school refusal behavior are characterized by an anxiety based or child-based absenteeism causing a general feeling of unrest across the entire school day beyond the fear of an isolated circumstance at school. All of the aforementioned terms are considered to be within-child, rather than related to the environment.

On the contrary, social/criminal justice experts place a greater emphasis on looking at behaviors and external factors related to truancy and delinquency when describing absenteeism (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Henry, 2007; Reid 2005). Truancy is termed by excessive unexcused absences caused by a variety of circumstances. Delinquency is associated with rule-breaking behaviors and those often associated with conduct disorders. These terms are often characterized by factors within the environment, or in combination with internalizing factors.

Researchers such as Reid (2008b) and Wilkins (2008) referred to student absenteeism, as school non-attendance, while Dube and Orpinas (2009) described absenteeism as school refusal behavior. Eaton, Brenner, and Kann (2008), Hartnett (2007), and Kearney (2008) specifically defined absences as *excused* or *unexcused* at the elementary, middle, or high school. In comparison, García-Gracia (2008) referred to unexcused absences as *unacceptable* absences. In addition, Reid (2005) suggested we must go a step further when defining terms by exploring the various types of absenteeism. Types of school absenteeism include, but are not limited to “lesson absence, post-registration absence, parentally condoned absence, psychological absence, school refusal, and school phobia” (Reid, 2005, p. 59).

As previously noted, there is much inconsistency in how school leaders define and use

terms related to student absenteeism. Therefore, one researcher specifically argued for a clear, common definition and understanding of non-attendance and student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). Kearney (2008) sought to “develop consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers...to arrive at efficient methods of preventing and reducing absenteeism at individual and systemic levels” (pp. 275-276). The use of a common definition and understanding would likely assist school leaders in effectively establishing and consistently implementing attendance practices and policies.

The School Leaders’ Role in Addressing Student Absenteeism

Throughout history, school leaders have often responded to student attendance and truancy issues by blaming students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hartnett, 2007). Schools have blamed students rather than seeking to understand their individual needs and those factors which may be driving their absenteeism. Consequently, one researcher suggested there is a need “to intervene in the causes of absenteeism beyond normative and reactive practices that end up generating more absenteeism” (García-Gracia, 2008, p. 276). Further, the researcher suggested schools identify and address any internal risk factors within the school which may lead to student absenteeism. This means schools must be willing and prepared to respond to any internal risk factors and to make change, as deemed necessary, in the best interest of students.

Researchers have suggested school leaders take a more supportive approach to addressing student absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). This would require school leaders to embrace the complex task of exploring their role in promoting student absence by evaluating their current attendance practices and policies (García-Gracia, 2008; Hartnett, 2007; Wilkins, 2008). Essentially, in studying their role, school leaders would need to identify and take ownership of their actions related to student attendance, whether positive or negative. School leaders would

need to recognize and respond to the positives and negatives related to their actions with the intent of improving the system.

Multiple researchers suggested school leaders take a comprehensive approach to addressing student absenteeism alongside students, parents, educators, and community members (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Eaton et al., 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; García-Gracia, 2008). Researchers have suggested school leaders work hand-in-hand with those most greatly impacted by student absenteeism. In particular the students and families impacted by student absenteeism. Hartnett (2007) suggested school leaders get personal with other stakeholders to change the culture of non-attendance (p. 40). One study in particular pointed to the “benefits of going outside the school, of involving others, of understanding more fully the whole experience of the child” (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 257). The authors suggested there is a need to understand individuals – students and their parents. In doing so, this involves establishing, building, and maintaining relationships. Taking a comprehensive approach would require school leaders to look beyond the walls of the school by establishing and committing to a strong two-way communication system with students and their families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

More than one study suggested school leaders must take into account student voice when addressing attendance problems (Hartnett, 2007; Reid, 2008a). This means school leaders must actively engage in reflective conversation with students to gain an understanding of their perspectives related to student absenteeism. As they build this understanding, school leaders must be prepared to work with students to improve student attendance. “Making affective change means getting down to the personal, relationship level and addressing the cultural beliefs and practices” (Hartnett, 2007, p. 40) with students.

Giving voice to students would likely assist in further connecting them to their learning

and to the school, in turn improving their attendance. Reid (2008a) suggested student voice is one of ten key variables to improving student behavior and attendance despite the fact some schools are reluctant to seek student input. By accessing student voice, school leaders will be able to better understand the perceptions, language, and thought processes of students regarding their attendance and school practices and policies (Hartnett, 2007, p.40). By involving students in the process of addressing student absenteeism, school leaders have the potential to achieve more effective results.

Risk Factors Associated with Student Absenteeism

Research has pointed to a multitude of risk factors associated with student absenteeism. Kearney (2008) suggested such risk factors, as noted across studies, can be categorized by child, parent and family, peer, school, and community (p. 266). Over time such risk factors, particularly when co-existing, can cause increased levels of student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008).

Child-related factors. Child-related factors are those which have been described by researchers as stemming from within a child and, they are often referred to as internalizing symptoms (Kearney, 2008; Lauchlan, 2003). Such symptoms can be further described as anxiety, fear, and depression. Anxiety, fear, and depression can lead to withdrawal and escape from the school environment. A student may fear a particular circumstance in the school setting resulting in increased anxiety. He or she may suffer from increased anxiety when away from his or her parent or caregiver. A student suffering from depression may seek to withdraw from the personal interactions within the school environment. While these symptoms are often considered internalizing, they at times present themselves through recognizable physical symptoms such as headaches and nausea. Frequent physical symptoms and illness among students account for a high percentage of absences from school (Eaton et al., 2008).

Beyond physical symptoms, students may exhibit low self-esteem, school phobia, separation anxiety, school refusal, and behaviors that manifest with emotional difficulties (Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b). Students with emotional difficulties often engage in physical and verbal aggression, destruction of property, and other safety violations related to school discipline policies (Kearney, 2008, p. 259). These emotional outbursts and safety violations are often met with disciplinary actions. Often times, such disciplinary actions result in student suspensions outside of school, thus impacting student attendance and participation in the school setting.

Additional child-related factors have included academic difficulties, challenging relationships with authority figures, job requirements outside of school, pregnancy, and underdeveloped social and academic skills (Eaton et al., 2008; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid 2008b; Wilkins, 2008). Some students have reported they are absent from school as a way to avoid school work which they perceive to be difficult or beyond their academic abilities. Other students have reported they are absent from school as they are trying to avoid negative interactions with teachers and administrators who they perceive as authority figures. Often times, these are individuals whom they have had difficulty in the past. In today's economy, there are more and more students faced with the reality of maintaining employment outside the school setting to support their families. For some, this impacts their ability to consistently get to and attend school due to the impact of taking on early morning and late night shifts. Hartnett (2007) has also questioned whether "teenagers' perceptions, language, and thought processes regarding attendance policies are the cause of attendance or non-attendance and consequent academic outcomes" (p. 40).

Parent and family-related factors. Unlike child-related factors, which come from within the child, parent and family-related factors, among others, are considered to be those

which have been imposed on the student. Specifically, students throughout K-12 public education in the United States have been faced with parent and family-related factors linked to the current financial state of the nation. Student attendance has been impacted overtime by issues stemming from unemployment, poverty, transiency, and homelessness (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Kearney, 2008; Reid 2008b). The impact of a parent's unemployment, poverty, transiency, and homelessness has been described by some researchers as taking a toll on an entire family. In particular, for some it has resulted in depression on the part of a parent, which in turn has impacted his or her ability to make sure his or her child is in school. In reality, finding a job, putting food on the table, and/or securing consistent shelter may take precedence to ensuring student attendance at school. Further, in light of the current economy, many students have been described by researchers as being expected to seek employment to support their families, to provide childcare for younger siblings during school hours, and to provide transportation to and from school on their own (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Hartnett, 2007). As previously noted, securing and maintaining employment to support a family can have a negative impact on a student's attendance. Also, a parent's work schedule may require a student to watch younger siblings during school hours and/or impact his or her ability to get him or herself to school.

Additionally, many students are faced with parents who exhibit inadequate parenting skills or involvement, low expectations of school performance, and poor communication with school officials (Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b; Wilkins, 2008). Lack of parent support, in general and in relation to the school experience, can have a negative impact on student attendance in school. This is further compounded by those parents who exhibit poor supervision, psychopathology, intense conflict and chaos, and a history of school attendance and truancy issues themselves (Kearney, 2008). Parents who exhibit poor supervision may not be aware their

child is not in school. Students of parents who exhibit high needs related to psychopathology and intense conflict and chaos may find themselves turning to support their parents in lieu of attending school. Also, parents with a history of school attendance and truancy issues may, at times, discredit their child's attendance in school, resulting in increased absences. It is also worth noting those parents who take their students out of school for religious holidays, family vacations, and stressful family events related to illnesses or deaths in the family (Eaton et al., 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) add to the number of days students are out of school.

Peer-related factors. The older students get, the greater it seems the impact peer-related factors have on student absenteeism. Peer-related factors include the desire to be accepted through a peer identity group, peer pressure, bullying, and gang-related activities (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid 2008b). During the formative years, students often go to extremes to be accepted by their peers. For some students, this means succumbing to peer pressure, which results in participation in activities that pull them away from the school setting during the academic day. There are also those students who avoid peer interactions in the school setting due to previous incidents involving bullying and gang activity. This avoidance of peer interactions can have a negative impact on student attendance.

In her 2007 study, Hartnett (2007) questioned whether or not peer group identity influences absenteeism from high school, as she suggested, "teenagers often look for love and acceptance through their peer identity group" (p. 36). She further indicated, "it is impossible to overstate the importance of peers related to the emotional safety students experience or do not experience inside of the classroom" (Hartnett, 2007, p. 37).

Unfortunately, not all students have been described by researchers as feeling safe in their interactions with their peers in the school setting. Multiple researchers raised concern over

students who experience negative peer interactions in the school setting (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Kearney, 2008). Kearney (2008) drew attention to peer-related factors involving peer pressure, proximity to deviant and gang-related behaviors, and victimization from bullies (p. 266). When students do not feel safe in school, they are more likely to exhibit non-attendance behaviors. Specifically, Attwood and Croll (2006) suggested students who experience bullying are more likely to be absent from school (p. 477).

School-related factors. The literature centered on school-related factors raised concern over the negative impact of school practices, organizational cultures, and relationships among students and school personnel on student attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b). Hartnett (2007) suggested “some policies are ineffective and may inadvertently cause [a] disconnect by rewarding the nonattendance of particular peer groups” (p. 38). In particular, she spoke to the use of excused and unexcused absences among Jocks and Burn-Outs. Further, she studied the attendance of students who do and do not participate in recognized extracurricular activities. She noted some discrepancy in how attendance was tracked among the aforementioned peer groups, suggesting not all students were treated equally (Hartnett, 2007).

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) and Reid (2008b), like Harnett (2007) have shared a common belief that schools have influenced and in some cases, caused non-attendance among students. “School characteristics and practices can influence rates of absenteeism and truancy among students,” (Attwood & Croll, 2006, p. 309). “Much truancy and other forms of non-attendance are caused by schools themselves,” (Reid, 2008b, p. 346). Kearney (2008) raised concern about the impact of inconsistent attendance practices and policies, negative student-teacher relationships, and inadequate responses to diversity as they relate to student absenteeism (pp.

266-267). Some policies and practices, as previously noted, have historically perpetuated student attendance concerns. Also, some relationships between teachers and students, and the discrepancy in how students are treated based on their cultural background and race have been described as having a negative impact on student attendance.

Community-related factors. As previously noted, social/criminal justice experts have studied external factors related to student absenteeism. In particular, they have focused on community-related factors, which on a larger scale, are those outside of the school and home settings. Such factors have been described as unsafe neighborhoods, inconsistent law enforcement, media pressure, and a lack of support services (Kearney, 2008; Reid 2008b). In some cases, when students have felt unsafe in their neighborhoods, due to violence and high gang-related activities, they have been described as hesitant to leave their homes. This is compounded when students and families have not felt protected by local law enforcement agencies and/or have felt like they do not have access to outside community supports. Overtime, this can have a negative impact on student attendance in schools.

Implications of Student Absenteeism

Simply stated, “children who are excessively absent from school are at risk for various negative health and social problems” (Dube & Orpinas, 2009, p. 87). Similarly, “students who are absent from school for any reason, whether with or without permission, are more likely to engage in health risk behaviors than students who have no absences” (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 226). Such problems have included drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behavior, teenage pregnancy, suicide attempt, and violent acts (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Eaton et al., 2008; Henry, 2007; Kearney, 2008). Researchers have described all of these problems as presenting, in and of themselves, with potential challenges related to non-attendance in schools and beyond.

Additionally, research has suggested a high level of absenteeism places students at risk for permanent dropout from school (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Dube & Orpinas, 2009). Permanent dropout from school closes the door to a multitude of academic and social opportunities that cannot be replicated in other settings. Permanent dropout from school can lead to more significant problems later in adulthood, including unemployment, economic deprivation, marital difficulties, and in some cases incarceration (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Henry, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Wilkins, 2008). Overtime, unemployment and economic deprivation, if not resolved, can lead to transiency, poverty, and homelessness. These factors can cause a great deal of stress on all individuals within a family, resulting in a family's inability to stay together. In extreme cases, permanent dropout from school can lead to behaviors resulting in incarceration.

Student Voice

“Because of who they are, what they know, and how they are positioned, students must be recognized as having knowledge essential to the development of sound educational policies and practices” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 12). In recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on student voice, which as described by Cook-Sather (2006), “has emerged to signal a range of efforts that strive to redefine the role of students in educational research and reform” (p. 360).

One study ascertained:

If we are truly interested in understanding what supports or detracts from students putting forth more effort, becoming more engaged in learning experiences, and achieving at higher levels, then it only makes sense that we would include them in our inquiry. (Sands et al., 2007, p. 327)

Previous research suggested students must be given the opportunity to be heard, listened to, and recognized for their contributions to their education, as they are an excellent source of knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2006; Gunter & Thomson, Sands et al., 2007; Smyth, 2006b;

Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Students have the capacity to help inform the decision making that takes place in the school setting; particularly if the decision making directly impacts their school experience.

Much of the literature centered on student voice has drawn on the notion of strengthening democratic principles in schools by allowing students to be heard and listened to (Cook-Sather, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Sands et al., 2007). Students should be given the opportunity to become actively involved in their learning beyond the classroom, allowing for active participation in school governance. Specifically, students should be involved in shaping the decisions which impact their participation in schools (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). By involving students in school reform efforts, Mitra (2005) suggested schools will be more successful. She ascertained student voice should be a “catalyst for change” (Mitra, 2005, p. 521).

Challenges Related to Eliciting Student Perspectives

The twin challenges of authorizing student perspectives are:

(a) Changing the structures in our minds that have rendered us disinclined to elicit and attend to students’ voices and (b) changing the structures in educational relationships and institutions that have supported and been supported by this disinclination. (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 4)

Over the course of the past decade, literature centered on student voice has suggested some school leaders are hesitant to elicit student perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002; Gunter & Thomson, 2007). Specifically, some school leaders have struggled to accept and attend to perspectives that differ from their own. When presented with ideas differing from their own, some school leaders have become threatened. By eliciting student perspectives, school leaders have been forced, at times to hear things they do not want to hear, which altogether presents a multitude of challenges (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). School leaders may have been called to the carpet about their practice. They may have felt forced to show their vulnerability in front of multiple stakeholders.

As a result, some school leaders have found it easier to reject student perspectives by not seeking them altogether.

Student Voice in Educational Reform

While research has pointed to some hesitation in soliciting student perspectives, as previously noted, it has also paid tribute to the notion that student voice should be at the forefront of educational reform (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Mitra, 2005; Sands et al., 2007; Smyth, 2006b). One study specifically noted, “Authorizing student perspectives introduces into critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies in practice” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). Students should be considered partners in conversations centered on educational practices and policies that directly impact their lives. Students should be given the opportunity to problem-solve within the school environment, bringing their own experience to light. Further, students should be given “authorship and authority in their lives at school” (Thiessen, 2006, pp. 352-353). Educational reformers have ascertained students should be given the opportunity to shape their education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism at a purposefully selected middle school.

Specifically, the study explored the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism among middle school students at a middle school in an urban community, in the Midwest. In order to better understand the experiences of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism, this phenomenological study was designed to explore the following research questions:

- How do middle school students perceive and describe their absenteeism?
- How do their parents and/or guardians perceive and describe such absenteeism?
- What are the school attendance policies and practices?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in implementing the policies?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in responding to student and parent perspectives?

This chapter describes the necessary procedures that supported the completion of this study. Specifically, the chapter describes the research design, strategy of inquiry, subjectivity, ethical considerations, site and participant selection, data collection strategies, data recording procedures, data analysis, standards of validation, and implications for this research study.

Research Design

As the researcher, I was faced with the crucial task of identifying a suitable research design to answer the aforementioned research questions. I had to consider the structure of the research and be prepared for the “give” of the design (Maxwell, 2005, p. 6). I had to be prepared to “continually assess how the design [was] working during the research, how it influenced and was influenced by its environment, and to make adjustments and changes so that [the] story

would accomplish what [I] wanted” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3).

Given I sought to explore the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism among middle school students at a purposefully selected middle school, I gathered information through a qualitative approach. Qualitative research, as described by Creswell (2007), is designed to explore a problem or issue (p. 39). Such exploration of a problem or issue is often in response to “a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). By conducting a qualitative study, I heard what I believe were the silenced voices of middle school students identified with chronic student absenteeism.

Qualitative research “uses verbal descriptions to portray phenomena; consists of unstructured interviews in which subjects, expressing their own thoughts, explore the topic with the researcher; employs inductive logic to find an explanation; and develops an explanation for a perceived relationship” (Krathwohl, 2004, p. 5). Further, qualitative research allows a researcher to conduct research in a natural setting, while using an interactive and humanistic approach (Creswell, 2003, p. 181). Through an interactive and humanistic approach, I interviewed the research participants within their community, in their natural setting, as I sought to understand the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism. My research was emergent, as opposed to tightly prescribed, as I sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of the research participants. Like other qualitative researchers, I was open to change within the research process, as “qualitative research has an inherent openness and flexibility that allows you to modify your design and focus during the research to understand new discoveries and relationships” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22).

Strategy of Inquiry

While there are several strategies of inquiry associated with qualitative research, I choose to conduct a phenomenological study. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomena” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Phenomenology draws upon the early work of Husserl, a German mathematician, suggesting there is a philosophical argument centered on pure consciousness as a “meaning-making process” involving “intentionality” (Duarte, 2000, p. 181). To better understand this meaning-making process and intentionality, I turned to the work of Vagle (2009) who suggested,

The term intentionality in phenomenology is not used to describe one’s purposes and is not meant to reflect common phrases such ‘that was not my intention’. Rather, intentionality marks the *in-between* spaces between subjects and the world and is that which links us, as humans, with the world we experience. (p. 586)

Duarte (2000) noted, there is some level of connection between intentionality and dialogue in a phenomenological study in that attention is “turned toward the [intentional] meaning making of others” through dialogue and conversation (p. 183). Phenomenology allowed the research participants to tell their stories and me to help them make sense of their experience through an interview process which capitalized on dialogue and conversation. “By meeting people, talking to them, listening to their narratives, observing their use of tools and the environment, etcetera, we gain access to life world phenomena” (Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, & Ohlen, 2007, p. 261). As a strategy of inquiry, phenomenology allowed me to build my knowledge about a phenomenon by gaining access to the research participants’ lived experiences through an interview process. “Phenomenological research allows the researcher to “identify the “essence” of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

By conducting a phenomenological study, I sought to understand the central phenomenon

of chronic student absenteeism among middle school students at a purposefully selected middle school. I attempted to “understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25). This phenomenological study allowed me to build an understanding of common experiences among the research participants, leading to new learning, which in turn led to my recommendations to support informed decision making about practices and policies related to student absenteeism.

Subjectivity

There is currently debate among phenomenologists as to whether or not a researcher should aim to bracket his or her “previous understandings, past knowledge, and assumptions about a phenomenon so as to focus on a phenomenon in its appearing” (Finlay, 2009, p. 12). When bracketing, “the focus of the research is placed in brackets, and everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Bracketing assumes I would be able to immerse myself in the research while separating my previous knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions related to the research topic. It is believed, by bracketing, I would have a better chance of engaging in the research process with an open mind. Some phenomenologists suggest bracketing sets the stage for someone like me as the researcher to be “non-influential and neutral” (Finlay, 2009, p. 12).

A number of researchers have noted bracketing, as previously described, is an impossible, undesirable task (Finlay, 2009, p. 12). Such researchers suggested, they as researchers should recognize and honor the previous knowledge, insight, and predispositions they bring to the study. McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2011) went so far as to argue, “The experiences, pre-suppositions and values of the researcher are legitimate components of the research” (p. 30). They have seen value in having the researcher acknowledge his or her

assumptions early on and become self-aware. Such acknowledgement is considered bridling and involves “taking an open stance, scrutinizing one’s involvement with the phenomenon, and continually reflecting on how meanings ‘come to be’ in the research act” (Vagle, 2009, p. 585).

For the purpose of this research study, I recognized and honored what I brought to the study through bridling. I reflected on my own experience as an educator and school leader, acknowledging how and why I is drawn to understanding the central phenomenon of student absenteeism. In doing so, I committed to learning from the research participants, rather than making meaning alone from what I brought to the study. As the researcher, I guided the research, rather than anticipated the results.

Ethical Considerations

“In recent years we have become increasingly aware that research using people may inadvertently harm them – not just physically but by embarrassing them, violating their privacy, and so on” (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008, p. 83). For this very reason, ethical considerations were taken into account when conducting this research study. It was my responsibility as the researcher to maintain the safety and confidentiality of each of the research participants. “People studied should always be interacted with in a way that embodies great responsibility and confidentiality as regards each person’s life situation” (Berndtsson et al., 2007, p. 274).

Specifically, when conducting a qualitative study which involves human subjects, “two issues dominate traditional official guidelines of ethics in research; informed consent and the protection of informants from harm” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 48). Throughout the study, I, as the researcher, ensured I followed the official guidelines of ethics in research, as set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the College of Education. In doing so, I secured IRB

approval for the research study (Appendix A). I informed IRB, as the committee of human subjects, as to the nature and structure of my research and the steps I planned to take to maintain the safety and confidentiality of the research participants. IRB insists the researcher ensures “proper informed consent and safety for the participants” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 48). In complying with IRB, I recognized the importance of my role in “seeking consent, avoiding the conundrum of deception, maintaining confidentiality, and protecting the anonymity of individuals with whom [I spoke]” (Creswell, 2007, p. 44). I sought to maintain respect for the privacy of the research participants to avoid risk and harm throughout the entire study.

Informed Consent

“A key part of work with human subjects is obtaining informed consent. It is especially important where there is any possibility of risk; minors are involved; privacy may be invaded, and potentially distasteful self-knowledge may result from participation” (Krathwohl, 2004, p. 208). In this study, I reduced the possibility of risk for all participants, including the middle school students identified with chronic student absenteeism, who are considered minors, by adhering to the guidelines for obtaining informed consent.

As I worked with the grade-level, middle school counselors to gain student consent and participation in the study, I responded to the needs of the potential research participants. Upon identification using a predetermined percentage of days absent, those students identified with chronic student absenteeism were given a recruitment letter and consent form by their grade-level counselor on my behalf (Appendix B). As previously noted, the predetermined percentage of days absent, as defined in the third definition by Kearney (2008) was used in this study. The definition is as follows:

A satisfactory definition of problematic absenteeism must account for all aspects of nonattendance...and be practical enough for use by researchers, clinicians,

educators, and others. As such, problematic absenteeism could refer to school-aged youths who (1) have missed at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks, (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least 2 weeks with significant interference in a child's or family's daily routine, and/or (3) are absent for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15% of days absent from school). (Kearney, 2008, p. 265)

The student recruitment letter described the research and invited the students to participate in the study. Specifically, the letter described my assurance of confidentiality and the students' right to participate voluntarily and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Further, the letter described the interview protocol and use of data.

Those students who wished to participate in the study were asked to sign two consent letters. The students were also expected to gain parent and/or guardian permission, supporting their participation in the study. Once the consent letters were signed by the student and parent and/or guardian, one copy was returned to me as the researcher via a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The second copy of the signed consent letter was to be kept by the student.

Similarly, I followed a consistent process in securing informed consent from each of the parents and/or guardians of the middle school students identified with chronic student absenteeism; subsequently, as participants in the study. I also secured consent of the members of the school's administrative team as identified by the building principal. This overall process assisted me in maintaining the confidentiality of the students, their parents and/or guardians, and their administrators as participants and non-participants in the study.

Protection of Research Participants from Risk

The student and parent and/or guardian interviews raised the risk of making the participants feel vulnerable in that they were asked to share their experiences related to student absenteeism. Additionally, in being identified as potential research participants they may have felt obligated to participate in the study since the research was linked to their school experience.

The initial letter describing the research assured the potential interviewees that failure to participate would place no repercussions on their existing school services or students' education. Further, the letter indicated all research participants would be asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Additionally, interviews with the members of the school's administrative team raised risk to a minimal degree. Due to the small nature of the study, there remains the inherent possibility members of the school's administrative team may be identified. Like the students and parents and/or guardians, any members of the school's administrative team who expressed interest in participating in the study were asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identify.

The Researcher as a Mandated Reporter

As a mandated reporter, I was conscious of my legal responsibility to report any suspected issues of abuse or concerns about child health and safety. At the same time, I was aware of the potential fragility of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism and that of their parents and/or guardians. I did not want to appear to threaten the research participants or to make unwarranted assumptions about the safety of their situations. For that reason, I carefully worded the student and parent and/or guardian consent letters to restrict confidentiality to academic writing and reporting. Further, I did not want to create a hostile research environment, minimizing my ability as a researcher to engage this population by making note of the possibility of reporting to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Therefore, the student and parent and/or guardian recruitment letters raised awareness to my responsibility to report some matters, as required by law.

Site and Participant Selection

“The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question,” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). Specific to a phenomenological study, “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study,” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125).

In this study, it was important for me to identify and secure a research site with students impacted by chronic student absenteeism, as defined in the study. I also had to take into consideration the location of the research site relative to my residence and work, as a means to ensure the feasibility of gaining continual access to the research participants over a period of time. In doing so, I worked with my fellow doctoral colleagues in the field to identify a middle school impacted by the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism.

Initially, in speaking with the assistant superintendent in the district which I completed the study, he described the district as being impacted by student absenteeism, though he did not speak to specific data. My conversation with the assistant superintendent led me to my initial conversation with the building principal at the middle school who shared data to support their concerns about student attendance. The principal indicated the attendance rate for the middle school, as noted on their Report Card Data Collection Form (ISBE 86-43) for a period of three years was as follows: 92.9% in fall 2009; 93.4% in fall 2010; and 94.1% in fall 2011. While the percentage of students in attendance at the middle school increased over the three-year period, the principal noted an upward trend in the chronic truancy rate as follows: 1.2% in fall 2009; 1.3% in fall 2010; and 4.7% in fall 2011. Further, he raised multiple questions about what at the time was the district’s soon-to-be loss of their outreach worker whose primary responsibility was

responding to attendance concerns across the district.

Upon securing the research site, I worked with the principal and grade-level counselors to identify and secure the research participants. In doing so, we used Kearney's (2008) third definition as follows:

A satisfactory definition of problematic absenteeism must account for all aspects of nonattendance...and be practical enough for use by researchers, clinicians, educators, and others. As such, problematic absenteeism could refer to school-aged youths who (1) have missed at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks, (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least 2 weeks with significant interference in a child's or family's daily routine, and/or (3) are absent for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15% of days absent from school). (p. 265)

As of the 75th day of school, which was considered a 15-week period in the aforementioned definition, the principal indicated 75 students were identified as eligible to participate in the study.

Upon identification, as previously noted, the students and their parents and/or guardians were given a recruitment letter and consent form by their grade-level counselor, on my behalf. The recruitment letter described the research and invited them to participate in the study. Also, twelve members of the school's administrative team, as identified by the building principal were invited to participate in the study.

As the researcher, I anticipated having to limit the number of student and parent and/or guardian participants by securing the first three to five who submitted their signed consent letters, along with their parents and/or guardians. However, only five students come forward to participate in the study. Therefore, I was able to maintain a small sample size without turning anyone away. Maintaining a small sample size allowed me to take an in depth look at the experiences of those individuals connected by the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism. Use of a small sample size is typical in qualitative research, as suggested by

Maxwell (2005), “Qualitative researchers typically study a relatively small number of individuals or situations, rather than collecting data from large samples and aggregating the data across individuals or situations” (p. 22). Again, a small sample size allowed me to collect extensive detail about the experience of my research participants.

Data Collection Strategies

For the purpose of this study, I used interviews as my dominant source of data. The interview, as noted by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) is used to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p. 103). Through interviews I gained rich data and insight into the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism through the lens of the research participants.

Securing and Scheduling the Interviews

Upon receipt of the consent letters from the five students identified with chronic student absenteeism who came forward to participate in the study, I worked with the building principal and the students’ parents and/or guardians to identify a secure location in which to meet with the students individually. In doing so, when interviewing onsite at the middle school and within the community at the library and adolescent treatment center I worked to limit the students’ identification as participants in the research study any more than necessary.

When scheduling the interviews with the parents and/or guardians of the students identified to participate in the study, I worked with them to identify a secure location within their community to conduct the initial and follow up interviews, in attempt to maintain their confidentiality. I conducted interviews onsite at the middle school, at the community library, at a local church, and on two occasions over the telephone.

Finally, upon receiving initial consent of the participation of the members of the school’s

administrative team via email after they had received the recruitment letter from the building principal, I scheduled individual interviews accordingly. When I was onsite at the middle school to conduct the interviews, I obtained receipt of the consent letters from the members of the school's administrative team. Consistent with the majority of the student interviews, I interviewed the members of the school's administrative team in a secure location within the school setting.

The Interviews

As the researcher, I began the interview process, as previously noted, as Moustakas (1994) suggested by engaging in “a social conversation... aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). I built rapport and maintained a feeling of comfort, ease, and trust among the research participants. This was evident during the initial and follow up interviews, as they turned to conversations in which we shared an array of emotions. Throughout the interview process, I focused on building and maintaining a credible relationship with each of the research participants.

As the researcher, I used open-ended interview questions to engage my research participants in the study. The use of such questions allowed me to build on the responses of the research participants by asking further, more focused questions. My questions quickly grew beyond those which I prepared for the initial interviews, as I found the research participants took the lead as their stories unfolded (Appendix D). This was not surprising, as Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, and Hendry (2011) suggested, “Expansive, honest and reflective accounts may be less forthcoming and more difficult to access from participants if a rigid set of questions or a more structured interviewing technique are used” (p. 23). Specifically, the student and parent and/or guardian research participants' responses and stories led me to ask questions I never

anticipated. The interview questions became more individualized and personal to the research participants, as I sought to make meaning of their stories. The questions were directly related to their personal experiences.

As the researcher, I found myself immersed in the interview process by listening with the intent to expose the “inner voice” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011, p. 34) of the research participants. I acknowledged the expertise of the research participants by asking clarifying questions during the initial and follow up interviews with the students and parents and/or guardians. I probed with all of the research participants, as needed, to elicit further information and to clarify my understanding. I paraphrased the research participants’ comments, allowing for immediate confirmation of the accuracy of my interpretation. During the follow up interviews with students and parents and/or guardians, I sought further confirmation as to the information I had gathered in the initial interviews. Throughout the entire interview process, I sought to ensure the data generated was “co-constructed and reflective of the shared understanding” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011, p. 34).

Interview Timeline

The interviews with the students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school’s administrative team took place over a period of 23 weeks. While I anticipated each interview would take approximately 30 to 40 minutes, I found the majority of the interviews lasted at least an hour, sometimes more. It was my intent to allow adequate time, in a comfortable setting, for the respondents to tell their stories related to student absenteeism, which I believe I achieved. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of students identified with chronic student absenteeism, the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians, and the role of their school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and perspectives

through the interview process, I believe I opened the door to contributions toward future attendance practices and policies, with the intent of improving student attendance.

Data Recording Procedures

As the researcher, I was granted permission by 21 of 22 research participants, among the student, parent and/or guardian, and school's administrative team members to digitally record the interviews. The digital recordings were used solely for the purpose of transcription. I also took handwritten descriptive, observational notes during the interviews.

Each research participant was asked to provide a pseudonym to be used in any presentation or publication related to the study; initially for the dissertation and potentially for future conference presentations or journal publications. Any of the participants who opted not to choose a pseudonym were assigned a name. As the researcher, I developed a key for the pseudonyms, which has been stored in an independent file on a password protected computer that can only be accessed by me as the researcher. The key will be destroyed at the time all additional data are destroyed.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews with the students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school's administrative team, I reviewed my descriptive, observational notes and the transcriptions from the digital recordings of the interviews. I "engaged in the perplexing exercise of trying to make sense of the data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 43). In doing so, I reviewed the data through a critical, reflective lens, as I sought to understand the lived experience of those impacted by chronic student absenteeism; those who might be better described as marginalized or oppressed.

As the researcher, I used an approach known as interpretive phenomenological analysis

(IPA), which has “gained momentum and popularity”, among researchers in recent years (Pringle et al., 2011, p. 20). As an approach to data analysis, IPA allowed me to “interpret belief and accept participants’ stories, albeit in a questioning way” (Pringle et al., 2011, p. 21). As I aimed to make sense of the data, IPA allowed me to gain an in-depth view into the experiences of each research participant while at the same time, reflecting on how my background knowledge and life experience impacted the research. In using IPA, I was recognized as a key stakeholder in the research process.

In attempt to understand the data, I anchored my findings in direct quotes from the interviews. By using direct quotes of the research participants, I established thick descriptions of the data. I looked for common words and phrases across the research participants, making note of similarities and differences among their experiences. Specifically, as the researcher, I

described personal experiences with the phenomenon under study; developed a list of significant statements; took the significant statements and then grouped them into larger units of information called “meaning units” or themes; wrote a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. (Creswell, 2007, p.159)

Essentially, through this process of data analysis, I “ventured below the face value of the words to explore what the participant really means” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2001, p. 34). Using a reflective, critical lens, I formed interpretations as I aimed to provide support to school leaders who are faced with responding to student absenteeism.

Standards of Validation

As the researcher, I ensured credibility of the research findings throughout the study. Specifically, I sought clarification from the research participants throughout the initial and follow up interview process. I asked open-ended questions, paraphrased the research participants’ comments, probed for further information, and asked additional clarifying

questions, as needed (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011). I sought immediate confirmation of the accuracy of my interpretation during each of the interviews, and I sought further information and/or clarification related to the initial interviews with students and parents and/or guardians during the follow up interviews.

Implications for this Research Study

The literature on the role of the school leader in addressing student absenteeism and the literature on student voice supported my argument for the need to conduct this phenomenological study focused on the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism through the lens of students. Additionally, a critical review of the literature centered on student absenteeism suggested there was a need to turn attention to the elementary and middle school level (Dube & Ordinas, 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid 2008a). Specifically, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) suggested “elementary and middle schools need to focus on improving and maintaining student attendance and student motivation to learn” (p. 317). This supported my rationale as the researcher for conducting further research at the middle school level. Overall, the literature supported my thinking that the study had the potential to move beyond current research with the intent of opening the door to contributions toward improved attendance practices and policies, thus improving student attendance over time.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism at a purposefully selected middle school. Specifically, the study explored the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism among five students at a middle school in an urban community, in the Midwest. The study looked closely at the experiences and perspectives of the students identified with chronic absenteeism along with the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians related to such absenteeism. The study also explored the role of school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and perspectives as they address student absenteeism concerns. Further, the phenomenological study was designed to explore the following questions:

- How do middle school students perceive and describe their absenteeism?
- How do their parents and/or guardians perceive and describe such absenteeism?
- What are the school attendance policies and practices?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in implementing the policies?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in responding to student and parent perspectives?

As a means to answer the aforementioned research questions, I used interviews as my dominant source of data. Specifically, I conducted initial and follow up interviews with five students identified with chronic student absenteeism and their parents and/or guardians. I also conducted single interviews with 12 members of the school's administrative team, as identified by the building principal. The interviews took place between October 2012 and March 2013, onsite at the middle school, within the community, and in two instances over the telephone. Through interviews I gained rich data and insight into the central phenomenon of chronic student

absenteeism through the lens of the research participants.

Interview Findings

Upon completion of the interviews with the students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school's administrative team, I reviewed my descriptive, observational notes and the transcriptions from the digital recordings of the interviews. First, I separated out the findings for the interviews by students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school's administrative team by group. Within the findings, I organized the data by theme within each group of interview participants.

Student Perceptions

Between the months of October 2012 and March 2013, I interviewed five students identified with chronic student absenteeism. I conducted initial and follow up interviews with all five students. Claire and Jessica completed their follow up interviews with their mothers. Each of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. Table 1 on the next page summarizes the individual interview demographics specific to the student interview participants.

Peer relationships. When asked to describe their school experience, all five of the student interview participants spoke in some capacity to their relationships or lack thereof with their peers within the school setting. In reflecting on his experience in elementary school, Joseph, a 12-year old boy in sixth grade described his worst memory was related to his peers. He stated, "Kids didn't really like me...I saw them laughing about me and pointing at me and started laughing." As he went on to talk about his experience at the middle school, he referred to his relationships with peers as being the best thing. He shared, "I have a lot of friends here." Further, Joseph went on to say he feels like his best friend who he met in August 2012 is someone he can talk to. When asked if he spends time with his peers outside of school he responded, "Just

school.” Upon further probing, he indicated by saying, “Uh-uh,” that he has no other children or friends near where he lives.

Table 1

Individual Student Interview Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Grade	Number of days absent within 15 weeks
Joseph	M	6 th	11
Tony	M	6 th	22
George	M	8 th	12
Claire	F	8 th	11
Jessica	F	8 th	12

Like Joseph, Tony, a 13-year old boy in sixth grade, who resides with his paternal grandmother, lives in a neighborhood where there are no other children. Tony shared,

There are actually no kids around where I live, because my nanny lives in apartments where kids don't live – can't live. But the – I forget what they call those people who run our apartment...The manager said that I could live with her. So they said that was okay.

He went on to say, he has never had friends come over to his apartment to play, nor has he gone to a friend's house since moving in with his grandmother before starting middle school. Tony also referred to five female and male friends by name who he attends class and/or lunch, but he did not get into detail as to the significance of their relationships.

George, a 14-year old boy in eighth grade, also referred to his friends in the school setting by name. In particular, he spoke about his best friend. George stated,

You know how most guys my age are really awkward around girls; I have never, ever been awkward around girls. My best friend is a girl. I'm not even kidding you, and a rather pretty one at that. What's funny is that my science teacher

actually splits us up, boy, boy girl, so we won't talk as much. I talk more to the girls than I do to the guys. So that's never really a problem for me.

Though George talked about his friends, he spent more time talking about how he believes he has been perceived by his peers in elementary school and now middle school. In reflecting on when he moved due to his parent's separation during his fourth grade year in a neighboring community, he shared,

I had lots of friends. I was like so missed in my school, that I had a going away party like the whole day. Like all of the kids started to cry, because, you know, it's like having your best friend move away or something.

He went on to describe his first day in elementary school in the community which he currently lives as the day he "made eight new friends in an hour." As George talked about how he believes he has been perceived by his peers in middle school there was a shift in his thinking. George stated, "In sixth grade, I was known as the weird kid." When asked who considered him to be a weird kid he stated, "Everybody now, but they know that I'm just a good weird now." George went on to talk about his general concern for the interactions among peers in the middle school.

He shared,

And this school says it's a no tolerance bully school. That's a bunch of bull. More bullying happens in a single day here than at the high school does in a week. I can tell. Because it's like there's a fight here almost every single day. Kids here get like death threats and stuff. This seems it needs to be better enforced or something. And also, I can't exactly get into the school, but the kids are just outrageous. Most of them are anyway. Some of them are good kids, but most of them are just outrageous.

One of George's grade-level peers, Jessica, a 14-year old girl in eighth grade opened her initial interview with the following comment:

Well, I would like to stay to myself now, from now on, because it is less drama, and like I can get my work done a lot better. If I don't talk to anyone then I can focus more on my work than more on what's going on at school.

When asked to clarify what she meant by drama she stated,

Rumors, just dumb things that people like to make up. So I just decided to stick – I mean, I talked to people every once and a while but I just don't talk as much as I used to, because like people are just putting me in their drama, and I don't want to be in drama, so I'm just like, okay, I want to stay to myself...I really would describe it, I guess, it's a drama-filled school, full of crazy kids. I really don't want to go here, but I have to, because we live here.

Jessica went on to describe the drama as mostly between girls in common areas like the hallways during passing periods. She said the drama between students often starts as a verbal altercation and turns to a physical fight. Outside of the realm of drama, Jessica indicated she has a few close friends who she likes to talk to on the phone and to shop with at the mall.

Like Jessica, Claire, a 13-year old girl in eighth grade likes to “hang out with her friends sometimes.” Much like Tony's description of the worst thing in elementary school, when asked to describe the worst thing about the middle school Claire stated, “I think the students. Because they're really just disrespectful...Yeah, to each other, the adults...Cussing, name calling, stuff like that.” Consistent with George and Jessica, she indicated this disrespect takes place in the common areas, like the hallways and the lunchroom. She also indicated the disrespect carries over into the classroom.

Relationships with teachers and staff. Beyond talking about peer relationships when asked to describe their experience at the middle school all five students spoke to their perceptions of their relationships with teachers and staff. Joseph raised concern about his relationship with his teachers in elementary school in a neighboring town. He shared, “I really didn't like it there. My mom probably told you, but this one teacher said that I shouldn't have an IEP.” When asked to talk further about his dislikes during elementary school, Joseph said,

Well, one of my other teachers, I was playing with my hat on my head, and she yelled at me for playing with my hat. And she gave me a red card, I think. In grade school you get a green card. If you get a green card every day, you get something good. But I got a red card, so I had to go to the principal's office. I wasn't very happy with my teacher then.

As he talked about his transition to middle school he said, “Teachers are a lot nicer. They understand me.” When asked how he knows the teachers understand him he said, “They just know my problems.” While Joseph described his teachers at the middle school as understanding his problems, he indicated he did not consistently feel like he has a teacher or staff member to talk to. He stated, “Sometimes I get in trouble. But I really don’t care anymore. Actually, I kind of do, but I wish I had somebody to talk to, cause it makes me not think about me worried if I talk to somebody.” He went on to clarify he wished he had someone to talk to every day.

Unlike Joseph, Jessica indicated she would prefer not to talk with her teachers and staff unless they assign her with a one-on-one assistant to help her throughout her entire day. Jessica told me she was encouraged to ask for help during a recent meeting about her grades with her teachers and mom. When I asked her if she had done so, she said,

They said like ask for more help, like if I need help, ask for more help. So, no, I don’t do that. I just go to A Team. I don’t like asking for help, because like I said I need a one-on-one. So like if I need help through the whole worksheet, and they can’t help me, I don’t know what to do. So I just go to A Team, or I bring it home and ask my mom.

In her follow up interview, Jessica also indicated she feels like the teachers treat students differently. She shared,

They kind of treat kids differently. Like sometimes like they have – they’ll be nicer to some other kids than they are to other kids...I don’t know. I mean they give kids chances. I mean, they might give them more chances than some of the other kids.

Like Joseph, George recalled a negative experience with a teacher during his elementary school years in a neighboring district. He shared,

Well, you know, my teacher – I’m a very religious person, and I’m guessing that she isn’t. And also I’m very, you know, different, I guess. So I guess we just didn’t get along, because she expects all the kids to be the same or something. And I don’t think she has ever worked with someone who has had a disability

before. And so we just didn't – she was just not very nice to me, and I was very well behaved. But she was just very judgmental of me. Anytime I would bring up religion or anything she would get quite, I guess, cross. She wouldn't say that out loud, but I could see it in her face. But, and also I got the flu really bad like five times during fourth grade. That was just not a good year for me.

After talking about his experience in fourth grade, George talked about one of his teachers in middle school who he believes does not like him. He stated,

Well, my grades were not too hot in seventh grade. And you know, we had just found out I had ADHD. And I got on this new medicine that didn't work for me at all. So I switched when I was going into eighth grade and its working great now. But my teachers, some of my teachers just didn't like me... Well, one of my teachers didn't like me. Because, you know, she was just real rude, and even with my mother she was real rude. And you know, it's just – it was a little bit hard for me. I had a lot of stress going on too with like my home situation, because I live with like seven – my aunt and uncle and they had kids and all sorts of stuff. And they were just not very, you know, nice to us, I guess. My house is actually for sale, and we just got an offer like last week, so Praise the Lord for that. But you know it was really hard. I was stressed, and I had problems. But I've learned to overcome my problems and just take them for what they are, problems, they will pass.

Claire described her teachers as “cool”, and she said, “Teachers are the best thing.” She went on to say, “They're nice and giving, at least some of them.” Further, she explained,

When we have like substitutes they say that like, if you're good with the substitute and the substitute leaves a good report, I'll have a snack for you when you come back. And like when we watch movies, they provide cupcakes and stuff like that. They give us candy and stuff.

Like Claire, Tony shared that one of the reasons he likes his science teacher is because the teacher gives candy. He stated, “I like doing stuff in it, because like one time we had candy, and you generally don't get candy in school, hardly.” Tony later shared his perception about whether the teachers and staff know his name. He said, “I don't think the staff, but I know all my teachers know my name... Well they don't generally use my first name. They generally go by my last name, like Mr. Nicholas.”

Policies and practices. In some capacity all of the students shared their understanding of the policies and procedures related to reporting an illness while at school and/or reporting student absences from home. When talking about what he does when he feels sick at school, Joseph indicated, “Well, I usually tell somebody. I never thought about it until now that we’re talking. I never thought about it happening, like I was worried about this kind of stuff.” When asked to talk about whether or not he sees the school nurse, Joseph stated,

Actually, I used to go there all the time, but not anymore, unless I feel sick and they take my temperature...Because I used to go there so many times, they just don’t let me anymore. I used to go there because if I talk to somebody usually it helps.

He later shared, students need to have a temperature, or they need to throw up to get sent home. Joseph indicated he has at times been sent home, and either he or the nurse has called his mother to pick him up. He stated, “Sometimes they call home, but sometimes I call home.” He also shared his mother has to call the office if he is absent.

Like Joseph, Tony talked about what kinds of illnesses result in going to the nurse’s office and then, at times, home. He shared,

Like what type of things? If you have like the flu, they would test your temperature and generally send you home, if the temp was high. If you had like stomachaches, if they were really bad, then they would call home and tell them – I don’t know what they do else...If I feel like I’m going to like puke and then I could come home. If I have a high temp; Say I have a high temp. If you check it, and it’s high, then they’ll call my nanny and tell her to come find someone to pick me up. If I feel like I’m going to puke, then I –

When referring to his visits to the nurse’s office, George said,

When I go to the nurse’s office, normally when I’m sick the nurse isn’t even there. I just like call home and tell my mom what’s going on. My mom knows these things. She’s not a nurse or anything, but she just like knows these things. So normally she’s just like, all right, but you’ve got to make sure you do your homework and stuff.

He went on to say,

I take the bus home; 95% of the time. If I am so sick that I'm about to fall on the floor, I'll just have my mom pick me up. But normally, I just don't want her to leave work just because she's just – I don't want that to happen.

George indicated, if and when he has stayed home sick, his mother has called the school to report his absence. He stated, “Just call the school and tell them I'm sick. Doctor's notes aren't required unless I'm sick for a long time.”

Claire, like George, also shared she calls her mother when she needs to go home early.

She stated,

When I go home early, I usually just tell my teacher I'm not feeling well and she'll either let me call my mom from the class or tell me to go down to the office. I'll just call my mom and tell her how I'm feeling, and she says that she'll be there in a minute and then I'll have to go get my stuff, and I'll just go home.

She further indicated on days when she is absent, her parents call the school to let them know.

She said, “They have to call the school and let them know that I'll be absent today, so that I don't get marked for skipping school.”

Jessica, who reported she wants to go home “all the time – everyday” indicated she rarely tries to visit the nurse's office or to get sent home. When asked if she ever tries to get a hold of her mom, she said,

No, cause I know like it's unnecessary. Like, I know I can stick it out. I know I'll be able to do everything in a day. But I don't contact her unless I'm actually sick. Like I if I came to school and do actually do feel sick, I'll call her.

When she is really sick, she indicated her teachers will send her to the nurse. Jessica shared,

I tell like it depends if I'm in language arts and I tell her I don't feel well, then she'll send me down to the nurse. And if they decide that I really need to go home, then they'll send me to the office, and I'll call my mom.

Jessica was unsure of the procedure for reporting an absence when she is not in school. She said, “I don't know. I'd just be in my room, and I don't be around her.”

Overall attendance and absenteeism. Upon reminding all five students about the purpose of my study, they talked about their reasons for being absent and in some cases, their overall attendance and absenteeism. Joseph talked about feeling fantastic in the morning and then sick by the afternoon most days. He talked about feeling sick after lunch, during 5th, 6th, and 7th period. He shared the following about when he starts to feel worse:

Like my stomach hurts sometimes, my head hurts. Sometimes even my arm hurts... Sometimes I don't tell anybody, but I'm actually seeing some things like seeing – well actually at my old school I used to see like these little things outside the window... Like little heads floating around.

During both his initial and follow up interviews, Joseph talked about being worried and feeling sick. He stated, “I just feel sick if I'm worried, I guess.” Further, he indicated he has had the flu and been sick with a cough. He also talked about his desire to be out of class or school when he is angry. He spoke to a specific incident that took place earlier this year in which he was upset, and he left the building without permission. He shared,

I walked out of the building to get some fresh air, and I'm not supposed to do that, apparently. Well, I knew I wasn't supposed to, but I really needed some fresh air... I didn't want to go to PE. I just went outside to cool down... The guy yelled at me.

George began by describing his attendance this year as “poor – just not good” as he shared his perception of his overall attendance. He shared,

I've always had absent problems, because as of like sixth grade and stuff, I've gotten sick kind of easily; because there are 900 kids in this place. And elementary school I would hardly ever get sick, but now I get sick probably once or twice a month. And that's why I've probably had like 12 absences this whole year.

He went on to say, “I have a lot of like stomach problems and head problems and like flu and stuff; that stuff that just goes around.” George talked further about the negative impact that eating non-organic foods, germs in the school setting, and stress have had on his health and well-

being. Specifically, he stated,

I've got to make sure that I can't let anything around me like stress me out or mess me up. Because if I do that, I'm just going to – because sometimes the stress I have is so great that it makes me get worse. My stress to do better and my pressure to do better actually make me do worse. Because I'm focused on that stress or pressure, rather... Stop being so perfectionist. Oh my gosh! I have such high expectations for myself that I just get overwhelmed. And it's like my mom says, you don't have to be perfect. But I don't believe it sometimes. And I understand there is not really such a thing as perfect. But my inner self-consciousness cannot – that's like it does not compute. Can't be perfect? What's that? That's just bull and a copout. No, you can be if you will be. And so up here I know you can't be perfect, but down here or around in here I don't know that I can't be perfect.

Like George, Tony also talked about his attendance in elementary and middle school.

When describing his attendance in elementary school, he said,

I went to school every day. But if I like – I had a doctor appointment a lot when I was in elementary. I had them – they were like common. But my doctor's appoints, generally it's my mom that just comes to pick me up. So generally, if I went with her, after she was done she would just take me to my grandpa's house, because she didn't want to take me all the way back. It's too much time and too much of wasting gas if you're going pretty far.

He described his attendance at the middle school as “not good” and he shared,

It would be like I would be sick one day, then like I'd come for like a half day and then be sick again then I'd go home. Then I would be like sick at home again. There would be like a day I'd have to be here for the whole day, and then I'll go home after school. Then there would be like a day I was sick again. Then I would come, and I would try to make it through, but then I would go home. Yeah. But there are – now I've been coming here all the days. But sometimes I have doctor's appointments and have to go to them.

Tony spoke specifically to seeing the doctor this year for stomach issues and to being placed on medication, which he described as having a positive impact on his attendance in school.

When asked to describe her attendance, Jessica stated,

Attendance, like me actually showing up? I don't know. I come like most of the time, but sometimes I like to – sometimes I like to stay home, so I guess I could say like I really like I would never get a perfect attendance award, never. Every year I usually get sick like every year. So I would never get a perfect attendance

award because of that. Because at the beginning of the year I was like really sick. I had like these sores and stuff and I was weak, so I didn't come to school. Then I had Bell's Palsy, so I mean I came to school, but the day I got it, like when I woke up in the morning I didn't come to school, because my mom didn't know what was wrong. So I went to the doctor, and they gave me this medicine to take. It's getting better now.

As previously noted, Jessica also talked about her desire to stay home from school due to drama between girls. However, she indicated this does not cause her to stay home, because she knows her mother will send her.

Inconsistent with the previous four students, Claire described her overall attendance as good. She stated,

I think it's pretty good. I come to school when I'm supposed to. I like coming to school. The only time I like – my mom even says it herself, when I stay home from school, she knows that there is really something wrong with me, because I like coming to school. I like getting up in the morning and coming to school and seeing my friends and my teachers and stuff. And I just like coming to school. And I go home early a couple times when I'm not feeling good. My mom comes and gets me. But other than that, I think I have really good attendance.

Claire indicated she goes home at times for headaches, stomachaches, and cramps. She also talked about staying home at times due to her allergies and acute asthma.

Family relationships. To some degree, each of the students talked about the relationships within their families. Joseph shared that he and his mother moved to the area in fifth grade when his parents separated. He indicated he does not see his father often when he said,

Not as often as I would like. Well a long time ago I used to see him for three months – I used to see him three months, then I would see him for the weekend, skip three months, see him for another weekend and that's it.

He indicated when he does see his father; they like to watch movies together. He also said he likes to watch television with his mother, and to play games like Canasta. He indicated they do not get out much due to limited finances, but that he was okay with this. As we talked about his

attendance, Joseph indicated his mom makes him go to school even when he does not want to. He said, “She usually says, well, sorry, but you have to go to school. So I go to school.” During his follow up interview, Joseph indicated he worries about his mother. He said, “Yeah, her dying, stuff like that...She knows.”

Like Joseph, George talked about having limited access to his father due to his parent’s divorce during elementary school. When referring to his father he said, “He lives [out of state]. I don’t get to see him very often, but it’s cool.” He talked about his current living experience with his mother, aunt, uncle, cousins, and dog. He said,

Well, we moved in with them when I was in fourth grade. And it was just supposed to be my aunt, my mother, and myself. That didn’t last long. And so it’s been hard for us, really. But I think things are going to start to get better... We already kind of have a house picked out. Everything is going to be a lot better. There’s going to be less tension in the house.

George talked about being close to his mom and to sharing a strong connection, like his mother, to the church. He shared,

It’s always been a very important part of my life since I was like six years old. Actually, a funny story about how I got in the church. We did this thing at my church, not even knowing, I didn’t know what church was about. And you know, we had this fun day and stuff. And I always went to Sunday school. And I liked Sunday school in addition to that, I’m like, mom, I want to go to church. She’s like, oh I don’t know. We’ll talk about it. And then we would come periodically. And then we got more and more involved, and my mom got baptized in like 2005. And then in 2010, I did also, because you know, I was getting into it and I really liked it, and I felt that I should do that. But yes, church is very important to me because it helps me to better myself and things.

Like Joseph, George indicated his mom questions his illnesses at times. Specifically, he shared,

She says, are you seriously sick again? Or are you just pulling that? Well, when I get home, when she finds that I’m eating something in my room, which I’m not supposed to do, she’s like, were you even sick at all today? Or is there something you want to tell me? Like the last time I was sick she told me that, because I had cookies that morning before I was sick, and I forgot to throw the package away. Cause I’m not supposed to eat in my room, and I know better. But I did anyways. I’m getting dressed, but I won’t eat breakfast. Yeah, so I got in trouble for that.

She said, were you even sick. I'm pretty sure you should not be eating Lucky Charms when you're sick. I'm like, mom. I don't want to hear it. Were you actually sick, or is there something you need to tell me? I'm like, mom, I wouldn't play – you know that right? She's like, I don't know anymore. Is there something you want me to know? Is there something you want to tell me? I'm like, yes, there's something I want to tell you, I was not playing hooky, I am sick, and you're making me upset.

Jessica indicated when she is sick, she is sick and her mother will keep her home.

However, when she asks her mom to stay home because she does not want to go to school her mother typically sends her to school. She stated, "She says no, and then like I'm please can I please stay? And then sometimes she says yes. Most of the times she will just be like, no you have to go to school, because it's school."

Outside of mentioning she lives with her parents and younger siblings, Claire did not speak to the relationships in her family. Even in her follow up interview, which she participated in with her mother, she did not talk about her family aside from saying she wishes she was an only child.

Parent and/or Guardian Perceptions

Between the months of October 2012 and March 2013, I interviewed the parents and/or guardians of the five students identified with chronic student absenteeism. I conducted initial and follow up interviews with all five of the parents and/or guardians. Mary and Maxine completed their follow up interviews with their daughters. Each of the interviews lasted 40 minutes to an hour and a half. Table 2 on the next page summarizes the individual demographics specific to the parent and/or guardian interview participants.

Child's school experience. Each of the parents and/or guardians spoke to their child's school experience during their initial and/or follow up interviews. They talked about their child's like or dislike of school, interactions with others, and their perceptions about their child's

attendance. As I talked with one of the parents and one guardian, they noted their role in working with the school to address their child’s concerns related to absenteeism.

Judy, adopted mother to Joseph, described his elementary school experience in a neighboring community as “difficult” with his fifth grade year as a “very, very bad experience.” She shared,

His teacher actually had been a seventh grade teacher, and this was her first year teaching fifth grade. And so she had very, very high expectations for her students. And I think that’s because she’d been a seventh grade teacher. And she clearly was not fond of Joseph and the curriculum was very difficult for him. He had tremendous amounts of homework. We’d spend at least two hours trying to get his homework done. He would end up in tears. He was not getting the work. The work was too difficult for him. I believe the fifth grade teacher caused him to hate school all together.

Table 2

Individual Parent and/or Guardian Interview Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Relationship to student
Judy	F	Adopted mother to Joseph
Ruth	F	Paternal grandmother to Tony
Esther	F	Biological mother to George
Mary	F	Biological mother to Claire
Maxine	F	Biological mother to Jessica

As Judy further reflected on Joseph’s elementary years, she recalled he liked preschool, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, and it was in third grade when things started going “awry”. She went on to describe his transition to middle school where she thought he felt the teachers were nice and caring. However, as this year got underway, she began feeling like Joseph

was taking advantage of a given situation in the school setting, and learning to manipulate. She described him as saying, “Oh, I can pretend that this is bothering me, and they’re going to let me – and I can call mom, because she’s close by. And they’re going to say I need to go home.”

Upon recognizing what she described as his manipulation, she worked with the school-based team to uniformly respond to his requests. She shared,

Okay, initially, what we did at the beginning of the school year was, you know his counselor. And at the beginning of the school year to address his anxiety, if he was feeling overwhelmed in class, and then to avoid him going to the nurse’s station, his teachers would send him to see her. And she would talk to him. He would stay in her office until his anxiety level lowered, and then she would send him back to class. He started abusing that. And so now, he is not given – he is not allowed to leave class, I believe. That’s how we came to that because he tried everything to get out of class. If he thinks he’s going to throw up, they give him a trash can. How did we come to that was him wanting to get out of class so much... All of his team teachers are aware of that... The nurses, everybody knows. The only way that Joseph can go home is if he is running a fever or if he is throwing up and is seen throwing up... I just hope we can get his problems addressed as far as him wanting to be in school or willingness to be in school.

Like Judy, Ruth, paternal grandmother to Tony, spoke to the need to work with the school-based team when responding to his school experience and absenteeism. She stated,

When it first started, when the first absenteeism, they’d just say, he’s sick, you need to come get him. Then when it looked like it was going to be a chronic problem, we’ve tried several things. It used to be that we’d say that if he had fever or vomiting. But he was making himself so upset that he could vomit. So now we’re at the point where he can only go home if he has fever. But the school, which Joseph doesn’t know, is if the nurse thinks that there is something that I will come. Not to let Joseph know. I certainly don’t want something to happen and the school is responsible. So I said, so long as you don’t let Joseph know, if you actually think there’s a reason for me to come, then I’m more than willing to come.

As Ruth talked further about Tony’s school experience, she described his elementary school years as “good”, and she noted his attendance concerns did not surface until this year in middle school. She stated, “Tony is not one easy for change. He likes routine. So I think going from one classroom to seven teachers and seven different classrooms has just been really hard on him.”

Like Ruth, Maxine, biological mother to Jessica, described Jessica's school experience as "great until she got to middle school". Specifically, she noted the following changes in Jessica's social relationships since entering middle school:

She's very social. She loves to talk, but she talks about things that are inappropriate. She'll talk about gossip she heard, and she'll get things started. She has kind of a mouth on her, where someone will say something to her, and she doesn't back down. And she just keeps on, and so she's been having problems where she gets in arguments with people at school. And I was worried that she was going to get into a fight. There was a time when the principal called me and said, Jessica is still at school. She got into an altercation with a girl, and we waited for the girl to get picked up first to go home.

She went on to talk about how she has encouraged Jessica to be respectful in her interactions in the school setting. She shared,

I say, you know, you have every right to feel the way you feel, Jessica, but there's a respectful way to say things, then there's a disrespectful. And that's the line she crosses, is, you know, learning even though you may have feelings that may not be the greatest, but just show them in a respectful way. You can't just speak to people however you want to speak to them. That's just not the way it works.

When asked to talk about how Jessica would describe the middle school she said, "She hates it".

She then went on to talk about Jessica's attendance in school. She said,

It started off kind of bad; because the day before school started she was sick. She had fever blisters in her throat, and she had an infection on her lip. So she was home. She missed the first day of school. Then shortly after that was when we had to take her to the hospital because we didn't know what was wrong. She woke up and one side of her face was just droopy, so I didn't know what happened. And we found out about that. She's had a few illnesses. But for the most part, I mean, unless she's sick, she's going to go to school.

Similar to Maxine's description of Jessica being disrespectful in school, Mary, biological mother to Claire, described Claire as being disrespectful in school. She shared,

She'd be late for class or she'd be talking in class or getting into confrontations in class. You know, if somebody says something smart to her, she ain't got no problem saying something back. So they more or less have her a teacher's aide to sit right beside her, to keep her calmed down... It seems like the older she gets, the more attitude and anger comes out. So you know, it's been a couple years with her. You know, I ain't got no problem taking her to the doctor and getting her

diagnosed.

While Mary described Claire's disrespect in school, she did not indicate it impacted her attendance at school. However, she did speak to a number of absences earlier in the year due to her asthma or her "friend". Unlike Judy, Ruth, and Maxine, Mary said she would pick her daughter up from school, no questions asked if she called her. She also indicated she is willing to keep Claire home if she is sick. She shared,

And when asthma kicks in like that, I just go ahead and keep her home. Cause if not, the school is going to call me, and I'm going to end up go getting her, or they're going to send an ambulance for her and take her to the hospital. Then DCFS gets called, and then they consider it medical neglect. So I don't care what I'm doing. I'll drop what I'm doing and go get my kid. And I've been doing this since, what, preschool?

Like Maxine and Mary, Esther, biological mother to George, indicated his attendance has been legitimately related to health concerns. She stated,

I would say probably comparing to the average student; he's probably missed quite a bit. It's all been legitimately health related, though. I don't know if it's just because we have so many people under our roof. Partially, I think it's just because of the atmosphere at school. George says the other kids are disgusting. He says, they don't wash their hands... So he gets grossed out every time he has to go into the bathroom or something there.

Esther talked further about George's school experience. She indicated he has been "advanced his whole life". As she reflected on his experience in school, she described his first grade and seventh grade years as his most challenging in school. Specifically she shared,

First grade I'm kind of thinking because the teacher had a system for disciplining the kids, which was basically sort of a traffic signal system. And so if the kids got on yellow or whatever, it was their warning that if they got on red, it was a note home to mom and dad or something like that. And a few times he got yellow, and in his mind that was just like the end of the world. So he would just cry uncontrollably. I mean, and when he gets in that state, he cannot see, he cannot hear, he cannot – nothing gets through until he calms down. So I think a lot of it just is again – just his perceptions of wanting to please, wanting to do well; and the same thing in seventh grade. I think he was just struggling so hard and feeling so stressed because, you know, we're trying to find the right medication for him

or trying to find the right techniques that will help him to stay organized and to stay on top of things. And when he's stressed out, it will reach this boiling point and he'll just explode. We have had one or two of these meltdowns this year, as well. But he's recognizing, you know, we talk about it. And he's recognizing that he needs to not let things build up but discusses them as they happen, so that we can take some of that stress off so that he doesn't get to that point where he feels like it's the end of the world.

Relationship within the school community. In some cases, it was with mixed emotions the parents and/or guardians spoke to their relationships within the school community. Each recalled at least one experience they had in their child's elementary and/or middle school that was less favorable, leading them to speak negatively about their relationships within the school community. Each parent and/or guardian was also able to recall a positive experience in their child's school career, causing them to speak in a more favorable light about their relationships within the school community. As the parents and/or guardians talked about their child's school experience at the middle school, they spoke to their personal connection or lack thereof to the teachers and staff.

After describing the negative relationship she and Joseph had during elementary school with more than one of his teachers and the principal, Judy described her experience with the middle school staff as follows:

It is a tremendous school. I think it is a school that sees each child as an individual. I think they are very interested in meeting each student's individual needs. I think the school knows each student. And I don't think that's just because – like with Joseph, I don't think it's because Joseph is this unique kid that has all of these needs that they meet. It is clear that when I come in, as kids pass the attendance monitor in the hall, she speaks to kids. There's a guy that stands in the hallway kind of monitoring who is walking by, and you hear him speak out to kids all the time. The resource teacher, it's clear that she takes a lot of interest in any of the kids walking through her doorway. When I've been in there and kids come in, she's calling out to different kids about different things as they walk through the door. So it's not just Joseph. It amazes me how much the staff seems to know about each of the kids as individuals. I think the way they have the teams set up – I don't know if you know about the teams. The way that they do the teams so that the staff can know the kids individually – I mean, when I was in

junior high, we were a huge junior high class, and you had this teacher for social studies and this teacher for math. You're in classes with all different kids all day long, and you may only have one class with this kid. But the way they have the teams set up, you know your team. And the teachers know their team. So they don't have to know everybody in sixth grade, they just have to know their team. I think that's an awesome idea, and that's why they know their kids. I'm very impressed by this school.

She went on to indicate she has personally connected with the school social worker and counselor. She even noted, while she has not had much interaction with the building principal that if she needed something that he would be completely available.

As Ruth talked, she focused primarily on her relationships within the middle school community, because it has been less than a year that Tony has lived with her. She shared,

I'm working on my end. The counselor calls me regularly, and that's really helpful. And there doesn't seem to be judgment on the school side. It would be very easy with his attendance to say, you know, what's wrong at your house? And I wish there was something as easy as saying that there was something. But they've been supportive.

She went on to describe his counselor as "wonderful". She shared,

When he complains about being sick, she'll say, you know you might feel bad, but you can't go home every time you feel bad. She'll walk him back to class, and then she'll go and check on him later to make sure he's still in the class doing okay.

As Mary talked, she reflected on Claire's experience at the middle school and the experience of her 18-year old son. Beyond sharing the following comment, she did not make further reference to her relationships within the school community,

The middle school is really good. They're real good to work with the parent if your child is having problems, you know, in school with one of the teachers or something like that. Their dean is good about calling and talking and figuring out what we can do to get the child to go the right way.

Like Mary, Maxine reflected on Jessica's experience at the middle school and the experience of her high school-age daughter. During her initial interview she described her

relationship within the middle school community as being different as the girls had different school experiences. She stated,

When we first started, well – okay, let me back up. My older daughter went to the middle school. She had a great experience. She really did. She was in – she started playing the violin, and she just had a really good experience. With Jessica it's been different, and I know part of that is because she's difficult and she doesn't want to listen to the teachers. But there have been times when I've had issues with the school. Jessica has Bell's palsy, so when that first happened, she couldn't drink out of a cup. She had to drink out of a straw. I brought the straws up there. They won't allow the students just to come to the office. They have to be called down there. And they never gave them to Jessica. So I called the school and said, well, why didn't anyone – well, did she know you were bringing them? Yes. Well, then how come she didn't come down to get them? Well, because the teacher told her she could not come down to get them, that they had to be – it was little things like that that kind of – then there was another incident where Jessica, she had to wear an eye patch for a while, cause she couldn't blink her eye. And because it was new it was tight on her face, so sometimes she would have it up. And one of the teachers told her, either this is serious or it isn't. We're not going to play around. And I had to call her and tell her, hey, you get a new eye patch and wear it around your head and wear it constantly for eight hours and see if you don't want to pull it up every once and a while. So it's just little things like that that I've had that kind of made me have like a little grudge against the school, I guess.

During her follow up interview which she participated in with her daughter, Maxine offered further insight into her relationships in the school community. She shared,

For me, I mean, overall I had a pretty decent experience with that middle school. We had a couple of instances. I'm talking about me. I've had a couple of incidences with her, and as far as the drama kinds of things I know that Jessica plays her part in it. So I can't really say too much bad about what the administration has done. There were a couple of times when I thought that I should have been informed about things and I wasn't, but overall it hasn't really been a bad experience. I just think it's been a bad experience for her, because she's had so much going on with illnesses. And then having the temper that she does and every little thing sets her off. So I think that's why it made it a little bit rougher for her.

In the coming months, Maxine hopes the middle school staff will support Jessica if and when she asks for help. She said, "I just hope that they listen and help her."

Unlike Judy, who described the school staff at the middle school as recognizing and

responding to students as individuals, Esther stated, “And my personal opinion is that they don’t really see to the needs of the individual student; Particularly a student with special needs.” As she described a recent meeting with George’s team she said,

I knew where his grades were at, but the fact that nobody reached out to us about it. And at this point I had been emailing his teachers. Some would work with me, and others didn’t even respond to my emails. And those were the ones that I was very concerned about, his math in particular. And what is interesting, we had his IEP meeting last week, and one of the teachers that came to his IEP meeting was his math teacher. And quite frankly, I busted her outright right in front of everybody, including one of the deans. And I said, you know, I did email you, and I’ve asked you about his grades and what difficulty he’s having, and you have not responded to me... But basically, I was just aggravated at that point. I had just been – George and I have sort of made a pact, and it’s just doing what you’ve got to do to walk across the stage, that’s it.

After talking about encouraging George to do what he needs to do to get “across the stage”, Esther shared her hopes and dreams for her son as he moves through life – with a smile on her face and a tear running down her cheek.

Family relationships. To some degree, like the students, all five of the parents and/or guardians talked about the relationships within their families. In particular, four of the parents and/or guardians spoke specifically to their relationship with their child.

Early on in her initial interview Judy talked about her separation from her now ex-husband and the impact she believes this has had on Joseph. She talked specifically about the days leading up to their move and then the day they moved. She said,

It was kind of crazy how things happened. I separated in February. What I was doing was separating for a period of – I told his dad that I wanted about four or five months for his dad to decide whether he wanted his family or alcohol. His dad got drunk and within that week, actually four days later filed for divorce, which took me completely by surprise. It was very upsetting to Joseph. That was on a Tuesday I left. That Saturday – the following day he had the locks changed, which I didn’t even realize was illegal. On that Saturday he had packed everything up of mine, supposedly. I didn’t get to go in the house to see if it was everything. But everything that he considered to be mine he had packed up and put in the garage, and we got everything on Saturday... So it was a crazy thing. It

was very hard for Joseph, because sudden change is very difficult; Although Joseph was very pleased about us moving, because his dad is a jerk when he's drunk.

Judy indicated she has been working with Joseph's dad to bridge his relationship with their son, while pulling herself out as the go-between. She has encouraged him to call Joseph directly and to make plans for their weekend visitations. Judy said that Joseph has told her he is happy she is divorced from his father, but she is not convinced this is always the case.

During both the initial and follow up interviews, Judy indicated Joseph suffers from separation anxiety, and it has been heightened since her divorce and Joseph's entrance to middle school. Further, she talked about how she believes her health has negatively impacted Joseph, causing him further anxiety. She shared,

I have bipolar. And when I was first diagnosed, Joseph was very young. He was in his first year of kindergarten. And I was hospitalized a lot. And it took them a long time to get it under control. I went through tons of medication changes. I ended up with lithium toxicity, which put me in the regular hospital for a long period of time. And by the time they diagnosed – I had bariatric surgery... So I was really, really, really sick... And it was probably six weeks after I had gone to the neurologist that I was getting so sick I could hardly stand up. I was just – and I felt like I was dying... I got admitted to the hospital; Like my organs were shutting down. I really was at death's door. I was in the hospital for a long time for that. That really scared Joseph. And nobody told Joseph how sick I was, but he knew... So he wasn't stupid. At this point he was seven or eight years old, and he knew something was really wrong. And I was in there for a long time. And so between the frequent hospitalizations for the bipolar and that incident, Joseph used to cry. And you would say Joseph, what's wrong? And he would say – and this was at school, too – his reaction was, I just never know if I'm going to come home from school and my mom is going to be in the hospital.

Judy indicated she is concerned about the long-term impact of Joseph's anxiety.

As Ruth reflected on Tony's childhood, she mentioned his father's time in prison, which was followed by his death at a young age. She also talked about what she describes as a strained relationship with his mother and disconnected relationship with his siblings. This led to him moving in with her prior to starting at the middle school this year. She described Tony as lacking

a one-on-one relationship with his mom, yet loving her. As Ruth talked about her love for her grandson and her relationship with him, she said,

He has had a lot of responsibility for a child as young as he is. I've been ill for a while. And he does stuff that to him seems normal, but to most 13-year old boys would not like, knowing that he can give me my insulin if I need my insulin, and I can't do it; or taking my sugar. Or if I can't get up to make myself a meal, he'll get up and cook me a meal. Those are responsibilities I try not to put on him, but he can do it if I need it. And that's not everything that a 13-year old boy would be willing to do. And he does it without much complaint. That's also part of it. I think he worries that something is going to happen to me, and where will he be if something does happen to me.

Ruth described her greatest fear for Tony is that he would have to go back to his mom if something happened to her. She said, "I don't see anybody else taking him." She hopes to be with Tony, who she "would not trade for the world" through his high school years; at least until a time when he can be on his own.

Like Ruth, Esther spoke to George's willingness to give and support her in the time of need. She shared,

I don't want to cry. George is such a gift. He is such a gift. Not just to me, but I think just to the world. He is just a special, special boy and he is just so amazingly brilliant...But he – I'm just so proud of him, because when he first got that bus pass he was 11-years old. I had been in an accident and had a serious broken leg. And I was hospitalized for a month. So that was the month he didn't have his mom. And he was tossed around from church member to church member, and also had to spend some time at home with the family who made him feel bad. And so when I came home, I was wheelchair bound. And I could not bear any weight. And he did everything for me. I had a commode kept next to my bed, and he would get up at six in the morning and come empty that nasty thing and clean it out. He said, mom I'll do whatever I can to keep you at home, just so I have my mommy here...He's just the light of my life.

As Esther reflected on being a support to George, she said,

I explained to him that when I get on his case about stuff, it's not because I don't love him or because I think he needs to make straight A's or anything like that. It's just I told him I'm equally frustrated, because I don't always know how to help you. And when I see you struggling, and I see all this stuff happening, it's hard for me, too, as your mom because I love you so much. When you're hurt, I

hurt. And so I think him hearing that and realizing that oh, wow, I thought it was just because she was mad at me. But it's because she's feeling my pain.

Esther talked about George having the potential to continue doing great things. She shared he continually brings value to her life, and she hopes to support him in understanding and accepting he does not have to be "perfect".

In her follow up interview which she participated in with Claire, Mary began by talking about how all of her children, unlike her husband, do not like change. When asked to talk further, she described herself and some of her children. She said.

I'm pretty much a home body, you know, kind of like a hermit. You know, cause I've worked since I was 15 years old until I was 37, and then they found out I had a deteriorating spine and arthritis in my left hip and arthritis in my left knee. You know, so I'm more or less a stay at home. Now if something changes at home, I get an attitude. But that's just part of my bipolar. You know, and because my 18-year old has it, and sometimes I think she has it, because she can just snap at a whim. You know, especially when it comes to the younger kids. You know, she's more protective over the nine year old boy than she is the eleven year old girl. So, yeah, I'm not too much on change. Once I've got something set, that's the way I want to do it, and that's the way it's got to stay. And that's what I tell my husband, because he likes to do change. And I'm not for that.

She went on to talk about her relationship with her husband and the impact his five prison assignments; totaling ten out of the last 20 years have impacted his relationship with their children. She referred to him as a "warden" more than once, and she indicated he does not let Claire do what she wants. In response to his "strict way", she referred to herself as a mother cub, as she said, "Don't mess with my cubs." Mary went on to talk about the negative interactions between her children over the years, and she described her 18-year old son who is in prison and Claire, as "not being afraid to knock each other upside the head."

Unlike the other parents and/or guardians, Maxine did not speak to the relationships or family dynamics at home. She did however indicate she is a single parent with six children. The children range in age from three years of age to 15-years of age. She is legally married but

separated, and her husband lives out of state. When asked if Jessica and her siblings see their father she said, they have not seen him since last summer, however they talk with him on the phone occasionally. She indicated while she and her husband are separated they try to maintain a civil relationship in front of their children.

Administrator Perceptions

During October 2012, I interviewed 12 members of the school's administrative team, as identified by the principal. Each interview was a single interview which lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. Table 3 on the next page summarizes the individual demographics specific to the members of the school's administrative team interview participants.

Diversity. When asked to describe the middle school, several members of the school's administrative team, as identified by the building principal noted the diversity in the school and surrounding community. In particular they talked about the diversity among students and families and the lack thereof among staff.

Todd, the principal of three years, started out by describing the school as a "comprehensive sixth through eighth grade school" that follows a "middle school model." He went on to say, as the largest middle school in the county the school brings a lot of diversity. He shared,

So, we're very mixed in terms of African-American students and white students. And then our Asian and Latino students are much smaller subgroups. The low income is the biggest issue facing our student population so we're somewhere between 65-70% low income at this point. That's just based on free and reduced lunch. We have a higher than average rate of students who are special education. I think we're close to 20% special education. We have about a 20% transient population as measured basically by kids who were not enrolled in the school last year or in the district last year.

Like Todd, Crystal, assistant principal of two years, stated, "Our student population is pretty well mixed and diverse." She went on to talk about the makeup of the staff. She stated,

“Our staff isn’t as diverse as our student population, sadly. We have tried to recruit other

Table 3

Individual Administrative Team Member Interview Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Position	Number of years in position
Todd	M	Principal	3
Crystal	F	Assistant principal	2
Mark	M	Assistant principal	5
Jayne	F	6 th grade dean	2
Maddox	M	7 th grade dean	4
Lori	F	8 th grade dean	3
Samantha	F	6 th grade counselor	1
Kerry	F	7 th grade counselor	7
Jackie	F	8 th grade counselor	11
Maria	F	Family liaison	5
Amy	F	Family liaison	6
Elizabeth	F	Attendance secretary	4

teachers, but for different reasons, people choose to go elsewhere. Our salary isn’t comparable so sometimes that’s a factor.”

Maddox, the seventh grade dean of four years who has worked in the school for twelve years described what he believes to be the shifts in the student population over the years. Like Crystal, he also noted inconsistency between the student and staff population. He said,

We have a growing Latino student population, maybe a slightly decreasing

Caucasian student population. Since the time that I've started here our low income percentage, which is what's reported, has grown. It's probably doubled in the 12 years that I've been here. We have a lot more students coming from poverty... Our teachers are not nearly as diverse as the student body. We do have some African American teachers, but certainly it doesn't mirror the student population... I think that the district actively recruits minority teachers. Unfortunately, I think a lot of districts, as well do. So we're not the only ones that are recruiting minority teachers actively. So I think it's hard to – you know, when you're competing against a lot of people, sometimes you'll win and sometimes you'll lose.

Lori, the eighth grade dean of three years described the diversity in the school as a positive that poses a challenge. She said,

We have a lot of different culture and diversity in this school, which is sometimes a difficult thing to deal with. But on the other hand, it's phenomenal, all the, you know, the heritage and a culture and different races and just neat to see.

Lori went on to talk about the economic diversity in the school, like Maddox. She described what she believes is an increase in middle class families who have been impacted by becoming single income families.

All three grade-level counselors touched on the diversity of the student population. Samantha, the sixth grade counselor of one year and Kerry, the eighth grade counselor of seven years both described the middle school as economically and racially diverse. Kerry went on to suggest the school has a "high mobility rate". She said, "I think it's around 15, 20%." Jackie, the eighth grade counselor of eleven years described the student population as diverse and the staff population as "unfortunately, white middle class who have difficulty understanding student issues".

Like Jackie, Amy, a family liaison of six years described the diversity between the students and staffs. She said,

I think the school is a very multi-cultural setting, very diverse in terms of the student and adult population here... I made reference to the student population being very diverse in terms of the ethnic makeup. I think when we separate and

it's time to move into staff meetings, I think that we tend to be able to look and see that diversity in terms of race is not obvious; especially when you look at the student population. The balance is not there in terms of the professional staff, should I say.

Relationships with students. When asked to describe the middle school, several members of the school's administrative team, as identified by the school principal spoke to the climate and culture of the building. This included multiple comments related to the perceived relationship between students and staff. Such relationships were described as positive, yet needing improvement.

Todd, the principal spoke to what he believes to be one of the most important components of an effective and exemplary middle school. In doing so, he shared his belief about why he thinks students come to school. He stated,

I think the number one reason kids come to school is because they like coming to school. And I mean, we are all told to go to school, but if I hated school, I wouldn't have gone. I mean I liked being with my friends, I liked teachers, I had fun at school. That part comes down to a relationship. So one of the things you'll see in middle school literature is that there is – yah, every child in the school has a meaningful relationship with at least one adult. I don't think we do that. I think if that piece were happening that would probably be more impactful than any policy, any discipline anything.

While he indicated he did not think they had worked to provide every student with an opportunity to build and maintain a meaningful relationship within the school community, he did suggest the staff is “vested in multiple ways”. He said,

I think the staff here is vested in multiple ways, not just wanting to have their kids do well as professionals but also because it's the community they live in, that's the community they serve. That's partly how I view things because I do live in the district. Building climate – I would say behavior is a significant issue. That is not the issue I would say is our most pressing issue publicly, but in that simply that I think our staff has a hard time managing and working with students with some of the challenges they come to school with. So they're coming to us with all of the issues you can think of that come with students from, not just low income families but families in poverty. Most kids are not always ready to learn. And that takes a certain kind of understanding of teachers. Some teachers are outstanding with it

and have no behavioral problems whatsoever. Some teachers seem completely baffled with what to do, and we're working with those folks. I think you know in terms of climate – do kids want to come to school?

Like Todd, Jayne, the sixth grade dean of two years spoke to what she described as the importance of relationships between students and staff in the school community. She indicated the building has shifted toward a more positive culture since Todd; the principal joined the staff three years ago. However, she noted there is room for continued growth. Jayne said,

I think we're a positive culture. I think the principal has come in and made some new changes. I think this is his second, third year. So, I think there is a positive culture and climate, but there is always room for change and improvement in working together as a team. But I think overall we've got a good set up here, a good make-up with some good initiatives. With anything, it takes some time and you have to get those people to buy in to understand what the initiatives are for. A lot is I think building relationships and I think we do have a lot of teachers that do care about student learning and building those relationships. I work primarily with the sixth grade team because the whole time I've been here it's been sixth grade. You know I have a passion for the 6th grade area and have some really great teachers there that work with kids, build relationships with the families.

As Jayne talked about trying to connect with those students identified with attendance concerns, she shared her belief about hearing a student's story. She started out by asking,

What is it to get them pulled in to try and make that difference? And they are some of the toughest ones. And there are multiple layers down at the end to try and see what is going on. Then you hear their story, and say oh I kind of get why you don't care. You know, sometimes it's bigger than us.

She talked about being a cheerleader, motivator, and encourager for students, helping them to see the value and purpose in being in school. She said, “If those connections, those relationships are there, then we can be like, hey, where have you been?”

In support of building relationships with students during their three years at the middle school, Lori, the eighth grade dean talked about the role of the grade-level counselors. She indicated the counselors follow their students from sixth through eighth grade over a three year period. She shared, “What it is, it's a way the counselors get to truly know the students and be

able to be a true advocate and see the progress and help them throughout the three years.”

Kerry, the seventh grade counselor shared similar thinking when she said,

When you first start working with kids in sixth grade, you don't have that relationship with them, so it just takes I feel like a lot longer to handle problems because you don't know what motivates them and what makes them – you know, what they're going to respond to. So I think when you don't know the kids as well yet, you feel a lot more like you're spinning your wheels. Or you don't know the approach to take. And in seventh grade, I really feel like we spend much less time – we spend just as much time with kids, but it's much less time on specific incidences, because you don't have to figure out everything from the ground. You just have that relationship. I mean, there are some kids that I barely ever see in three years, and then there are some kids I see three times a week. So those kids that I see a lot, I mean, by the time they're in seventh grade, you really have a relationship and what works with them and what doesn't.

Much like Jayne, Maria, a family liaison for five years suggested the following about building relationships with families of students identified with attendance concerns:

I will say not seeing the students as just – not making assumptions that the student is just missing school because he just doesn't want to come to school. I will say it will be a lot better for the students and some families if the teachers and all the staff pay attention. Because sometimes it just takes a look at the student for you to see that something is going on. Or just try to go that extra – take that extra step in trying to communicate with the parents, trying to see that we're not just assuming that the student is missing school because they want to miss school or because they're making excuses, but because we are concerned because we care, and we want to make sure they have what they need to make sure the student is here. I don't want to make assumptions, but sometimes it's something so obvious. When you ask or when you talk to the students' family, sometimes you say, this was so obvious and no one really saw it. It's just communication.

She went on to say she believes families and students should be treated as individuals. Teachers and staff must know and understand what goes on around families.

Like Maria, Amy, a family liaison suggested teachers and staff should seek to understand family dynamics. Further, she indicated they should be warm in their communication, and they should demonstrate understanding. They should meet families where they are.

Policies and practices. All 12 members of the administrative team, as identified by the

building principal spoke to their perceptions related to the attendance policies and practices at the middle school. Specifically, all of the team members spoke to the elimination of the outreach worker at the onset of the 2012-2013 school year; some raising question about their role in responding to attendance concerns. Further, the majority of the members talked beyond student absences from school to responding to those students who are tardy for class.

As Todd, the principal reflected about the current responsibilities of staff in responding to student attendance concerns, he spoke to a shift in practice since the elimination of the outreach worker. He shared,

On paper, right now, it's the attendance secretary. However, I have not had any attendance letters come across my desk and we're almost a quarter in. She had other responsibilities that are getting picked up by the social worker in terms of kids who are homeless and working with those families to make sure we get them to school. That is a whole other issue of absence. It has really completely fallen through the cracks, I would say. I can fault myself on it too because I have not made a referral to truancy a priority. Partly because there is also no one at the county level to really follow up with on. [The outreach worker] would typically monitor attendance and when kids got to five and 10 days of absence, she would follow up with the kids. Really, when we actually started taking serious action would be when the academic team would bring a student to her, bring a student to a counselor, bring a student to an administrator, and then we would be looking into it more. The teachers really know when the absences interfere with academic work. Then they get concerned, and say hey what's going on with this kid? So that could go through multiple people.

Todd went on to suggest the role of responding to student attendance concerns is a delegated role beyond his position. In particular, he spoke to the involvement of the student services team in communicating with parents and students. However, he questioned how efficiently it is happening at this point.

Crystal, an assistant principal described the responsibilities of the former outreach worker, whom she supervised. She indicated the outreach worker would reach out to parents via phone calls and written correspondence. She also noted she worked directly

with students, providing incentives for good school attendance. Crystal said the outreach worker was responsible for contacting the Regional Office of Education (RoE) when students were identified as truant. Crystal indicated she is currently working with district-level administration to think through how they might be able to delegate the responsibilities of the former outreach worker. In the meantime, her perception is the teachers typically go to the counselors with attendance concerns. Crystal said, “But they kind of just know they usually go to the counselors first, but as a clear plan of this “is what you do steps”, we don’t have them.”

Like Crystal, Kent, the other assistant principal spoke to current conversations with district-level administrators related to the elimination of the outreach worker. He shared,

We are talking about it at the district level about what exactly we're going to do officially to replace. We have been asked to just do the best we can. Try to go through the same processes that we were going through with the outreach worker there knowing that the fidelity is going to be less than it was because we don't have a dedicated worker for it. The assistant superintendent, who will be superintendent next year, I know he is working with a couple of people in the district to try and figure out a true process and procedure. But right now, we don't have that. So at this point we're doing the best we can. I believe what's happening is, we have grade level deans for each grade level. I believe that they are not in an official capacity but I just believe by proxy between the deans and the counselors, they're swallowing up a lot of the work that outreach worker used to do. There's not this set person to do that anymore. So if it becomes enough of an issue they're taking up the slack as they can.

When asked how attendance concerns are reported, Kent, like Todd suggested they may be brought to the attention of the problem solving team by the classroom teachers. He went on to talk about responding to student tardies. He said,

I mean the deans are definitely on the front lines of handling the whole tardy situation. I believe, unless it changed this year which I am pretty sure it did not, when it comes to tardies you have two freebies, so to speak.

Jayne, the sixth grade dean spoke to her previous interaction with the outreach worker and the perception of the outreach worker's role. She also went on to talk about what she would do this year if faced with attendance concerns. Jayne stated,

Well, we used to have that position or outreach worker that was grant funded. So we lost her this year. But I know in the past when I had concerns, I would often go to that position. You know, do you know what's going on with this family. And she would, because I did have a couple kids last year that were chronically on the absentee. She would do home visits and she would talk to the parents. Between the tardies, the chronically AM tardies and being absent, we had that ability for her to go to the homes and be the outreach. This year I haven't had too many problems or they haven't been brought to my attention. I suppose at this point, if I have something go on, I would go through my counselor or social worker. That's the avenue I would take. Because actually my counselor asked about something along those lines, and I said well check with social worker.

Jayne admitted to being unclear as to whether or not someone had been specifically assigned in a position to respond to student attendance concerns. She also indicated she would need to reread the school's attendance policy. Jayne went on to speak to her concerns about student tardies as follows:

Where I'm running into personal issues with tardies is my chronic tardy ones to class and my chronic tardy ones to school is getting the parents to connect with their child to try and make a change. Often times you get, oh I'll talk to them, I'll talk to them, but behaviors aren't changing at school. And then to trying to look a little bit deeper, okay what's going on with the student? Why can't you get to class? Are you socializing, disorganized? Is it the hallways? Is it too far a walk? Trying to back it up to why? Sometimes getting to that point trying to back it up sometimes with tardies, that gets trumped by behavior – you know a fight or something that's a little more serious. Unfortunately, tardies will often be pushed down to the bottom of the list.

As Maddox, the seventh grade dean reflected on the elimination of the outreach worker, he indicated her responsibilities had been shifted to the deans. He said the deans were responsible for contacting the parents and for reporting tardies and absences. He went on to say the deans would work with the social worker, as needed. If needed, the deans would also report truancy issues to the RoE.

Lori, the eighth grade dean raised question as to her responsibility in responding to student attendance concerns. She stated,

Well, I've never been that person, actually. We had an outreach person who was assigned. And so this is the first year that, because of budgetary cuts through the government, somehow, not knowing who pays for those things, and I've just always gotten used to having her available. Now that we don't, that is my question, which is – I've kind of taken that on now knowing that, just at the start of this year that I need to be that person full time as opposed to just the one that just kind of sees them. But I might have to actually start keeping track of who is absent. Or am I going to have to be the one that goes and does home visits or makes those phone calls or, you know.

As she shared her concern about the elimination of the outreach worker, she indicated she is “waiting always for the person that says this is now her job; as duties are assigned.”

Samantha, the sixth grade counselor who was new to the middle school this year spoke to her uncertainty about the overall attendance policies. She shared,

It's funny because part of what I have to do with new students coming into the building who weren't here initially, and who have not been students, is to meet with that student for probably one period per week and go over the handbook. So I should know all those policies. And I'm just trying to think of the connection. It seems like the school follows the policies in that they contact parents. I've had that automated system that parents are contacted right away. It's very clear about what is expected from the parent in terms of them calling in and, you know, and/or the student has been out and requesting work and things like that. I think the school does a pretty good job of following those policies. One of the things that has been in the back of my mind that's not really a policy, but we used to have an officer – I don't know what her title was, but she would do a lot more outreach. I mean, her position was cut. And so that was something at [my previous job] we did all the time. We went out to the homes just to find out what's going on. And I think that happens somewhat here. I think that our social worker, one social worker for the whole building, does that. And that's certainly something that I would be willing to do, but probably has not been something that counselors did too much of in the past. So I think not that that's a policy, but more a practice. So I think overall I feel like we do practice the policies that are in place.

As she talked further, Samantha reiterated her willingness to work directly with families in responding to student attendance and tardy concerns. She described herself as being on the

“frontline, trying to connect with the students, trying to get a sense of what their missing school is all about.”

Like several of the other members to the administrative team, Kerry, the seventh grade counselor questioned who is responsible for responding to student attendance concerns since the elimination of the outreach worker. She said,

It used to be our outreach worker. This is the first year we haven't had one. So I think – I don't know that there is one specific person assigned to it. There's probably not, and if there is I haven't heard about it. So I think it's, you know, it's me, it's the administrators, it's whoever the team – whoever is concerned about it. I think even when we had an outreach worker, like for instance this child didn't come to school anymore. So even with one person dedicated to that job, we weren't seeing a lot of difference. So now it's kind of everybody and nobody's job. I just see that getting to be more of an issue with the kids that are chronically truant.

Kerry went on to talk about the need for someone who has some degree of flexibility in being able to respond to student attendance concerns; someone like herself, the administrators, and the social worker. She indicated the individual would need to be willing to make home visits, thus making the role time consuming. At the end of our interview she shared she was still unclear who would take on this role.

Maria and Amy, the two family liaisons both indicated they consider themselves on the frontlines with families in their current work. They also anticipated they would take on an increased role of reaching out to families of students with attendance concerns through phone calls and home visits. Both team members also spoke to the lack of responsiveness of the RoE in the past in responding to student truancy concerns.

Specifically, Maria said,

But then when the referral went to regional offices, they were supposed to after several days of the student not being here, nothing was done. So I felt like parents were getting different messages. They were getting a message through the school saying, your child has to be here. The rule in the state is that they have to be in

school, and that you have to make sure that happens. And a lot of phone calls and a lot of home visits. And then it turned a little bit and, that if that continued, then the issue was going to go to the regional office of education, and they were going to be dealing with a truancy issue, and then nothing happened. After the information went to the regional office and nothing happened, I was involved – the last two years I've been involved with two families who have chronic attendance issues. And after we really did a lot in the school level, but when the referral went to regional office, nothing happened. So parents see that, parents learn that. So they start paying less attention or taking it less seriously when those things happen.

Elizabeth, the attendance secretary who is involved with student attendance on a daily basis, spoke specifically to her role. She talked about being the primary person assigned to keep track of the student attendance for the entire middle school. She is responsible for making sure teachers are entering their attendance data accurately and for providing the deans with daily attendance reports. She is also typically the first to respond when parents call their students in sick. She described students as having increased absences and tardies after holidays. When asked who was responsible for taking over the responsibilities of the outreach worker, she said,

Well, we used to have a position where there was a school and parent type liaison. This was the first year that that position was eliminated. And she would keep track of all the absentees and then make the phone calls to the parents, and then go out on actual visits to see if there is some reason why the student wasn't coming to school. But due to budget cuts and all, we no longer have that position. But I have to say that the teams, the way our school is divided up with different teams, I have gotten calls from the team facilitators wanting to know what's – do you have medical excuses for this child's absences? – Or maybe a teacher who is concerned. So even in the absence of the person who was the liaison, other people have taken that responsibility to kind of see where we can go with a student who has chronic absences.

Risk factors associated with student absenteeism. As the interviews got underway, the members of the administrative team as identified by the building principal shared their thinking about student attendance at the middle school. In doing so, several of the members talked about the factors which they believe impact student absenteeism; they spoke to their perceptions. In some cases they spoke to their personal experience with students with attendance concerns.

Todd, the principal suggested some students may be getting their parents to let them stay home from school even if they are not sick. He shared,

I think a lot of it has to do with – It's a parental thing. Sometimes the parent doesn't know about it, I'm just going to guess. And I'm really curious to see what parents tell you because they, I think some parents are okay with their kids not going to school. Some have expectations of their children will do things, like childcare. Some kids are really good at convincing their parents they're sick, and their parents believe them every time. We have a kid, one kid who finally went on home-bound. There was no actual illness, but he finally got a doctor's note. We are not aware of any illness. They did find a doctor's note requesting home-bound and that went on for two years before that home-bound went through.

Beyond not wanting to come to school, Maddox, the seventh grade dean suggested there may be outside factors impacting a student's attendance at school. He said,

I think that we have some kids that have a difficult time getting to school. Sometimes there are health issues going on with the students. Sometimes there could be health issues with parents. Sometimes the parents have smaller children, and the parents are trying to work, and we actually have had kids who were told to stay home and babysit so their parents could go to work.

Like Maddox, Samantha, the sixth grade counselor indicated there may be outside factors impacting a student's attendance that staff may not be aware of. She stated, "And you know, often the component that, you know, there is just something else going on in the family that takes precedence, or just getting to school on time just isn't a family value."

Kerry, the seventh grade counselor shared a personal story related to her experience with responding to student absenteeism at the middle school in the last couple of years. She said,

Well, you know, for instance, I have a seventh grader who he's on a LD caseload. And last year I'd say he missed probably half the year. He would miss two or three times a week. He should have been retained, but you know, we made a deal with him that if you go to summer school and you don't miss – because it was, from what I understood the mom was keeping him home because she was sick, and she wanted him to do things and things like that. So we kind of felt like it was something pretty much beyond his control.

Elizabeth, the attendance secretary also spoke to a specific example related to her experience

responding to student absenteeism at the middle school. She shared,

I've even had parents honestly tell me that their child did not come to school because they didn't have clean clothes to wear, and that they have to wait until they can get these clothes washed in order for the child to come to school. And I think some of the parents, you know, are enablers and the effort that it takes to get the child up and ready and prepared with homework and clean clothes and all of those things becomes too overwhelming for them, so it's easier for them to stay at home. You know, just let the child be at home.

Elizabeth said she is no longer surprised by the reasons parents share when calling their students from school. However, she remains concerned about some of the excuses.

Insight from the Students

Participating in the initial and follow up interviews with the five student participants confirmed my argument for the need to hear from and understand student perspectives when addressing student absenteeism concerns. Each of the five students, understandably, is the closest to his or her individual life experience, more so than his or her parents and/or guardians and administrators.

The students openly talked about their relationships or lack thereof with family members, friends, and teachers, going beyond a surface level, and in some cases spoke from their hearts. Three of the five students showed emotion as they talked about their life experience in elementary and middle school. By giving the students the opportunity to take the lead in sharing their personal experiences, I believe I was able to build a deeper understanding of their absenteeism.

By talking with the students I learned that their perspectives about their school and life experience were not always consistent with the perspectives of their parents and/or guardians and administrators. Without knowing the students' perspectives I believe it would be easy for parents and/or guardians and administrators to make assumptions about their absenteeism, leading to

responses that do not necessarily address potential underlying issues or concerns; those that may only come forward from talking directly with the students. The student interviews confirmed my belief that they should be collaborators along with their parents and/or guardians and administrators in addressing their absenteeism concerns.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Beyond

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of those students identified with chronic student absenteeism at a purposefully selected middle school. Specifically, the study explored the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism among five students at a middle school in an urban community, in the Midwest. The study looked closely at the experiences and perspectives of the students identified with chronic absenteeism along with the experiences and perspectives of their parents and/or guardians related to such absenteeism. The study also explored the role of school leaders in understanding and responding to such experiences and perspectives as they address student absenteeism concerns. Further, the phenomenological study was designed to explore the following questions:

- How do middle school students perceive and describe their absenteeism?
- How do their parents and/or guardians perceive and describe such absenteeism?
- What are the school attendance policies and practices?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in implementing the policies?
 - How do school leaders describe their role in responding to student and parent perspectives?

In this chapter, I analyzed the findings, summarized the study, and discussed the implication of the research findings for school leaders faced with responding to student absenteeism concerns. Further, I concluded by making recommendations for future research and policy work, taking a closer look at the impact of the research on my practice, and reflecting on the research overall.

Analysis

As previously noted, after separating out the findings for the interviews by students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school's administrative team by group, I reviewed the data and themes through a critical, reflective lens. In using a critical, reflective lens, I sought to understand the lived experience of those impacted by chronic student absenteeism; those who I might better describe as marginalized or oppressed.

Risk Factors Associated with Student Absenteeism

As I analyzed the data and themes across students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school's administrative team through a critical, reflective lens I was drawn back to previous research centered on the risk factors associated with student absenteeism. As previously noted in chapter two, research has pointed to a multitude of risk factors associated with student absenteeism. Kearney (2008) suggested risk factors, as noted across studies, can be categorized by child, parent and family, peer, school, and community (p. 266). All three groups of interview participants – students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the administrative team shared factors associated with absenteeism that directly connect to the risk factors described by Kearney (2008). Table 4 on the next page provides an overview of the risk factors by individual, student interview participant.

Child-related factors. Child-related factors, as noted in chapter two, are those which have been described by researchers as stemming from within a child and, they are often referred to as internalizing symptoms (Kearney, 2008; Lauchlan, 2003). Joseph, Tony, and George all described physical symptoms such as headaches and nausea which are often associated with internalizing symptoms. Further, each of the boys talked about stress and fears, which are also considered symptoms associated with internalizing, child-related factors.

Table 4

Risk Factors by Individual, Student Interview Participants

	Joseph	Tony	George	Claire	Jessica
Child-related	Internalizing symptoms - headaches & nausea; separation anxiety; stress & fears; physical & verbal aggression; academic difficulties	Internalizing symptoms - headaches & nausea; stress & fears; academic difficulties	Internalizing symptoms - headaches & nausea; separation anxiety; stress & fears; academic difficulties	Emotional outbursts	Academic difficulties
Parent & family-related	Financial stress; mother with medical diagnosis of bipolar; single-parent household; alcohol use by father; limited interaction with father	Financial stress; responsible for transportation; parent in prison; death of parent; living with grandparent with significant medical needs; limited interaction with mother	Financial stress; responsible for transportation; single-parent home; parent with a history of medical needs; limited interaction with father	Financial stress; single-parent home; limited interaction with father	Financial stress; mother with medical diagnosis of bipolar; sibling in prison; father previously in prison; strained relationship with father
Peer-related	Limited peer relationships; negative peer interactions	Limited peer relationships	Out-of-control peers; bullied	Negative peer interactions	Drama among peers
School-related	Positive connection with at least one staff member; negative interactions with staff	Positive connection with at least one staff member; negative interactions with staff	Positive connection with at least one staff member; negative interactions with staff; inconsistent treatment of students; not recognized as an individual	Positive connection with at least one staff member; negative interactions with staff; inconsistent treatment of students	Positive connection with at least one staff member; negative interactions with staff; inconsistent treatment of students

Joseph's adopted mother Judy talked further about Joseph's diagnosis of separation anxiety from her and his emotional difficulties resulting in physical and verbal aggression and safety violations related to school discipline policies. On two occasions in recent months, Joseph was suspended for hitting a wall at school and then a student when angry. Like Joseph, Claire

was described by her biological mother, Mary as having emotional outbursts at school, and she indicated she is concerned Claire may have bipolar disorder, as there is a history on both sides of their family. Kearney (2008) suggested such emotional outbursts and safety violations are often linked to internalizing symptoms.

Like Judy, Esther, biological mother to George suggested George experienced separation anxiety throughout his childhood, particularly in instances when Esther was sick and hospitalized. She spoke at length about what she described as George's self-induced stress, his desire to be perfect, and his fear of losing her as a caretaker. Esther and George both also noted his fixation on and fear of germs in the school environment. All of the aforementioned concerns, as noted by Esther and George can in some way be connected to the risk factors associated with student absenteeism, as described by multiple researchers.

Research has further suggested additional child-related factors have included academic difficulties, challenging relationships with authority figures, and underdeveloped social and academic skills (Eaton et al., 2008; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b; Wilkins, 2008). Joseph, Tony, Jessica, and briefly, George all noted difficulties to some degree with their academic performance. Joseph and Jessica talked about difficulties with their understanding of academic content. Tony and George talked about their difficulty with organization in the school setting, thus negatively impacting their academic performance. The parents and/or guardians confirmed their child's thinking and in some cases talked further about their perceptions of their child's challenges with social relationships and their child's inability to respond in an appropriate manner to authority figures in the school setting.

Parent and family-related factors. As described in chapter two, unlike child-related factors, which come from within the child, parent and family related factors, among others, are considered to be those which have been imposed on the student. Researchers have suggested student attendance has been impacted overtime by issues stemming from unemployment, poverty, transiency, and homelessness (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b). Joseph, Tony, and George described their families as having limited money impacting their ability to purchase items of interest and to spending time away from home for the purpose of entertainment. George described himself and his mother as “living in poverty”. Tony even recalled not returning to school after a doctor’s appointment during elementary school because it would cost “too much money for gas to drive back to school”. Consistent with the three students, all five of the parents and/or guardians described themselves as having limited finances to be used beyond paying the bills and putting food on the table.

Researchers further suggested many students are being expected to seek employment to support their families, to provide childcare for younger siblings during school hours, and to provide transportation to and from school on their own (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Hartnett, 2007). During the administrative team member interviews, Todd, the principal and Maddox, the seventh grade dean said they believe some parents may be keeping their children home to watch younger siblings, as the researchers have described. They, along with Kerry, the seventh grade counselor also suggested some parents may keep their children home when they, as parents are sick. George and Tony, along with their parent and guardian, respectively also talked about being responsible for taking public transportation to and from school.

Kearney (2008) also suggested student attendance at school is further compounded by those parents who exhibit poor supervision, psychopathology, intense conflict and chaos, and a

history of school attendance and truancy issues themselves. Of the five parents interviewed, Judy, adopted mother to Joseph and Mary, biological mother to Claire indicated they have both, as parents been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Mary, like Ruth, paternal grandmother to Tony also indicated Claire and Tony's biological fathers have been in prison multiple times, and that Tony's father had passed away in the last few years. Judy, Esther, and Maxine shared that their children are all now living in single-parent homes, and to some degree their children, Joseph, George, and Jessica, respectively, talked about their limited interaction with their biological fathers. Judy also spoke to Joseph's exposure to his father's extensive use of alcohol.

Peer-related factors. Peer-related factors, as outlined in chapter two, include the desire to be accepted through a peer identify group, peer pressure, bullying, and gang-related activities (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b). Attwood and Croll (2006) and Kearney (2008) also raised concern over students who experience negative peer interactions in the school setting. Joseph and Tony spoke to having limited peer relationships, with Joseph further describing negative interactions with peers. George described his peers in the school setting as "out-of-control" and as considering him as "weird". He noted he has been "bullied" throughout his school experience, but that he is used to it now. Jessica, like George, described her negative interactions with peers. She went so far as to say, she would prefer to be home-schooled to stay out of the "drama" with other girls in the school setting. When prompted by her mother during their follow up interview, Claire agreed that she has a difficult time keeping negative comments to herself during peer interactions, and she has no problem "getting into it".

School-related factors. As previously described in chapter two, the literature centered on school-related factors has raised concern over the negative impact of school practices, organizational cultures, and relationships among students and school personnel on student attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Harnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2008b). As evidenced through the student, parent and/or guardian, and administrative team member interviews there is a common understanding about the procedure for reporting student absences by calling the school when students are going to stay home sick. However, as evidenced through the student and parent and/or guardian interviews, there have been inconsistent practices for sending students home during the school day when they report they are sick. Some students are allowed to call their parents from the classroom to arrange going home, while other students are sent to the nurse's office or the main office. Once students are in the nurse's office, they at times are allowed to call home themselves and at other times the nurse calls home. Specific to Joseph and Tony, their parent and guardian, respectively have worked with school personnel to limit their access to the nurse's office altogether. Joseph is only sent home if he has a fever or is seen throwing up, and Tony is only allowed to go home if he has a fever, because he has been known to make himself throw up.

Across the student, parent and/or guardian, and administrative team member interviews, there was recognition of the impact of positive and negative relationships between the students and staff. All five of the students described instances in which they had made a positive connection with a single teacher or staff member. However, they, along with their parents and/or guardians talked at greater length about their negative interactions with teachers and staff. George, Claire, and Jessica, along with their parents talked about their dislike of the fact teachers and staff are consistently harder on some students than others. Further Esther, biological mother

to George, talked about her discontent related to her belief that her son has not being recognized as an individual with unique needs, interests, and strengths by school personnel. Mary, mother to Claire, also spoke specifically to the ease in Claire's ability to talk back to her teachers and to be disrespectful at a moment's notice.

During the interviews with the administrative team members, I learned multiple team members see value in building positive relationships with students. Todd, the principal described relationships between students and staff as a critical component of an exemplary middle school model. In support of this model, the grade-level counselors currently transition with students from sixth to seventh and then eighth grade. Through conversation with the deans, I learned they have considered following a similar structure, but to date they have remained at the same grade level across multiple years.

While multiple members of the administrative team spoke to the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with students, they noted their beliefs were not consistent with the current practice throughout the entire middle school; thus identifying room for improvement. Specifically, Todd spoke to the current inconsistencies among staff members in what he describes as their ability and willingness to respond to the issues and concerns students bring into the school setting, let alone those related to their instructional practice. Further, several of the administrative team members described the teachers as "caring about their students", but needing to better understand and respond to their students as individuals with unique life experiences.

The school leaders' role in addressing student absenteeism. Researchers have suggested, as noted in chapter two, school leaders embrace the complex task of exploring their role in promoting student attendance by evaluating their current practices and policies (García-

Gracia, 2008; Hartnett, 2007; Wilkins, 2008). At least once throughout each of the single-interviews with the 12 administrative team members, the research participants expressed appreciation for having the opportunity to explore the current practices at the middle school related to student attendance and tardies. Having said this, our conversations raised further unanswered questions and lack of clarity related to their role as school leaders in responding to student attendance concerns at the middle school.

Unanimously, the administrative team members expressed uncertainty related to the elimination of the outreach worker, who had previously been responsible for working directly with students identified with chronic absenteeism and their families, throughout the K-12 district. Also, they all spoke to the lack of clarity as to who was now responsible for responding to student attendance concerns. Crystal and Kent, the two assistant principals spoke to conversation at the district-level regarding the shift in roles since the elimination of the outreach worker, however, neither dean indicated any decisions had been made. A few of the administrative team members indicated they are waiting to be told to get involved in responding to student attendance concerns, while others named individuals they believe are currently responsible – the deans, the problem solving team, the teachers, and the counselors. Their understanding of who is currently responsible for addressing attendance concerns is inconsistent and unclear.

Beyond student voice. While I believe the findings across the student, parent and/or guardian, and administrative team member interviews connected to the research centered on student voice as described in chapter two, my thinking stretched beyond eliciting student voice. I was drawn back to the literature centered on a critical approach to leadership. As suggested by Shields (2006), a critical approach to leadership “acknowledges multiple realities, while at the same time, never ignoring individual needs,” (p. 73). A critical approach to leadership not only

provides opportunities for students to be heard, but also takes their perspectives into consideration. Students are recognized for the diversity they bring to the school setting; they are celebrated as individuals whose unique life experience is honored.

A critical approach to leadership recognizes the importance of building relationships between students and staff within the school setting, and the findings across the student, parent and/or guardian, and administrative team member interviews pointed to the need for such an approach. The students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the administrative team, alike spoke to the importance of and need for positive, meaningful relationships within the school setting. Further, the findings suggested there is a need to recognize students as individuals and to limit assumptions about the lived experience of the students and their families. Jayne, the sixth grade dean spoke specifically to the importance of hearing a student's story, and Maria, one of two family liaisons talked about not making assumptions about a student and his or her family just because the student is chronically absent. Researchers have suggested a critical approach to leadership opens the door for relationship building and limits the assumptions that are all too often made about individuals who may be best described as marginalized or oppressed.

Summary

The literature on the role of the school leader in addressing student absenteeism and the literature on student voice supported my argument for the need to conduct this phenomenological study focused on the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism through the lens of students. Additionally, a critical review of the literature centered on student absenteeism suggested there was a need to turn attention to the elementary and middle school level (Dube & Ordinas, 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid 2008a). Specifically, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) suggested "elementary and middle schools need to focus on improving and maintaining student

attendance and student motivation to learn” (p. 317). This supported my rationale as the researcher for conducting further research at the middle school level. Overall, the literature supported my thinking that the study had the potential to move beyond current research with the intent of opening the door to contributions toward improved attendance practices and policies, thus improving student attendance over time.

Specifically, after reviewing research centered on critical pedagogy, a critical approach to leadership, student absenteeism, and student voice, I identified my research site and participants. Upon securing consent of the research participants I began my 23-week journey of data collection. Through initial and follow up interviews with five students identified with chronic student absenteeism from a purposefully selected middle school and their parents and/or guardians and single interviews with 12 members of the school’s administrative team, I was able to move beyond current research centered on student absenteeism at the high school level. Upon completion of the interviews, I reviewed my observational notes and transcriptions from the digital recordings of the interviews. I separated out the findings for the interviews by students, parents and/or guardians, and members of the school’s administrative team by group. I further organized the findings by theme within each group of interview participants. From there I reviewed the findings and themes through a critical, reflective lens, as I sought to understand the lived experience of those impacted by chronic student absenteeism; those who might be better described as marginalized or oppressed.

Implications of this Study

As I reflected on the overall research study and my analysis of the research findings using a critical, reflective lens, it was clear there is an immediate need for the school’s administrative team to have a common understanding of the current attendance policies; as the research findings

from their interviews alone suggested there is inconsistency in their current understanding. Further, there is a need for the school's administrative team, with support of the district-level administrators, to define their roles in responding to student attendance concerns, as a result of the elimination of the outreach worker – the role of the principal, assistant principals, deans, counselors, family liaisons, and the attendance secretary. Beyond clarifying the roles of the administrative team members, the research findings pointed to the need to clarify the role of the teachers and staff in responding to students who indicate they are sick during the school day and to students who are tardy to school or class; as the findings indicated there is inconsistency in how teachers and staff respond to students who indicate they are sick and to students who are tardy. Further, the teachers and staff need to have a clear understanding about their role in responding to student attendance concerns; specifically, an understanding as to who they should turn to for support within the administrative team. Also, when defining roles, there needs to be a clear understanding as to who will work directly with students and families when addressing student attendance concerns and when and how such communication will take place. Further, as with any change in policy or practice, the school-based team needs to provide the students and their families with a clear understanding of what is expected on their end.

Beyond building a common understanding of the attendance policies and collectively clarifying the role of the school's administrative team members, teachers, and staff in responding to student attendance concerns, the research findings pointed to the need for the school's administrative team to explore a critical approach to leadership. This makes sense, as Todd, the principal described an exemplary middle school as one which all students have a "meaningful relationship with an adult". As previously noted, a critical approach to leadership supports the notion of building relationships between students and staff. Taking a critical approach to

leadership would ensure “all voices...be heard regardless of race, class, gender, and life experience,” (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991, p. 96). A critical approach to leadership would allow students and families to share their life experience; opening the door for the members of the school’s administrative team, teachers, and staff to respond to and support the true issues at hand. A critical approach to leadership, if understood and put into practice throughout the entire learning community would provide a framework for a change in practice for the good of all stakeholders; going beyond and not limiting itself to refining the attendance practices and policies.

As I reflect on my personal experience as a school leader, my situated self, I also recommend the members of the administrative team, teachers, and staff begin by connecting with at least one student and/or family in the short-term, as they simultaneously work to clarify their roles in responding to student attendance concerns and deepen their understanding of a critical approach to leadership. Like Furman and Starratt (2002), I suggest they allow those who have been marginalized or oppressed to share their lived experience. I encourage them to ask questions, to listen without making assumptions, and to lead without immediately telling their students and families they understand and can related to what they are experiencing.

Impact of the Research on My Practice

Throughout my 23-week journey of data collection, I found myself reflecting at work, at home, and even when I was out in the community on the personal stories and experiences of the individual research participants. My reflection led me to question my practice as an educational leader. How often was I stopping to hear my students’ stories; the stories and experiences of their family members? What assumptions was I making?

Over the course of data collection, I slowly started to shift my practice as an educational

leader. Much like I suggested in the implications of this study, I started by connecting with one student and family impacted by student attendance concerns. By engaging in conversation I sought to understand the factors impacting the student's attendance, providing supports to address the underlying, hidden issues. Further, I raised the level of awareness amongst our staff related to the importance of hearing all voices and limiting assumptions, while challenging deficit thinking.

Reflection on the Research Process

As I reflected on my research, which started long before and went well beyond the 23-weeks of data collection, I was reminded of the complexity of the process. The process was unlike any other I have experienced, and I have no regret about the focus and direction of the research. As previously noted, I believe my research pushed me to start shifting my practice as an educational leader. Specifically, my research led me to be more responsive to our students and families. By opening the door and engaging in conversation I have been able to build my understanding of the unique, individual needs of our students and families. This has in turn allowed me to focus my support and to address greater needs.

While I have no regrets about the focus and direction of my research, I would consider making a few changes to the study. Specifically, I would consider interviewing teachers as a means to gain further insight into the relationships and interactions among students and staff in the classroom setting. I would also like to better understand their role in responding to student absenteeism concerns. Further, I would consider conducting additional follow up interviews with the students and parents and/or guardians as a means to build a deeper understanding of their life experience, knowing that their stories were complex. I believe the addition of the teacher interviews and second follow up interviews with the parents and/or guardians would assist in

making further recommendations to school leaders for addressing student absenteeism concerns.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this study comes to a close, I recommend future researchers take a closer look at student attendance at the elementary school level, as the student and parent and/or guardian interview findings pointed to experiences and/or attendance issues among students during their elementary years. My recommendation is further supported by my personal experience related to addressing student attendance concerns as a school leader in an elementary school setting; my situated self. In addition, I recommend future researchers dig deeper into the interconnectedness of child-related, parent and family-related, peer-related, school-related, and community-related factors impacting student attendance concerns; making recommendations as to how to successfully address such factors, resulting in improved student attendance.

Beyond research, I recommend policymakers and school leaders consider the power of student and family voice when developing educational policies and practices. Like Gunter and Thomson (2007), I believe students [and their families] should be involved in shaping the decisions which impact their participation in schools, as “one voice [continues to be] eerily silent – the voice of the child,” (Sands et al., 2007, p. 341).

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Appendix A: College of Education Human Subjects Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Bureau of Educational Research

College of Education
38 Education Building
1310 South Sixth St.
Champaign, IL 61820



March 14, 2011

Kelly Sculles
Education Policy, Organization and Leadership Department
337 College of Education
MC-708

Dear Kelly,

On behalf of the College of Education Human Subjects Committee, I have reviewed and approved your research project entitled "Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders" This project meets the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)1 for research involving the use of normal education topics in an educational setting where the identity of the participant is protected. It also meets the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)2 for research involving the use of normal interviews where the identity of the participant is protected.

No changes may be made to your procedures without prior Committee review and approval. You are also required to promptly notify the Committee of any problems that arise during the course of the research. Your approved project number is #4789 and exempt approval is typically provided for three years with annual reports requested. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne'.

Anne S. Robertson
Coordinator, College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee

Cc: Dr. Richard Hunter

Appendix B: Recruitment Letters and Consents

“Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders”

Student Recruitment Letter and Consent

As a graduate student at the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, I am conducting research about student absences at the middle school. To better understand absences, I am going to interview students, their parents, and their administrators.

I would like you to be a part of this study. If you are interested and your parents/guardians are willing to let you participate in the study, I will host individual interviews in a quiet and comfortable place within the school setting. Each interview will take about 30-40 minutes, and follow-up interviews will be scheduled, as needed. With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded, to be used as transcripts by no one other than myself, as the researcher.

I am committed to maintaining your confidentiality and comfort level. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to give a fictitious name in order to protect your identity. The use of a fictitious name will help to make sure you will never be associated with any presentations or publications related to this project. All information provided through the interview process will be kept confidential with exception to anything I am required to report by law.

If you would prefer not to participate in this research project, it will in no way affect your services or support provided by the school. If you choose to participate, you have the right to decline any questions and the right to stop the interview at any time. As a small token of my appreciation, I will provide you and the other student participants with a gift card to a local department store or restaurant at the completion of the interview process.

Please complete and sign the included consent forms, keeping one for your records. The second copy can be returned to me in the included self-addressed stamped envelope. Once I have received the signed form I will contact you to schedule an interview.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Kelly Sculles, by e-mail at sculles2@gmail.com or by phone at (708) 899-2946. Additionally, you may contact Dr. Richard Hunter, Responsible Project Investigator (RPI) by e-mail at rchunter@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 333-1261. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, by e-mail at arobrtsn@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 244-0515.

“Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders”

Parent/Guardian Recruitment Letter and Consent

Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders is a research project, which seeks to understand the experiences of middle school students identified with chronic absenteeism. Through interviews, I, as a doctoral student and researcher, strive to understand absenteeism through the voice of those directly impacted by such experiences – students, their parents/guardians, and their building administrators.

At this time, I would like to invite you to participate in this study. If you agree, I would like to conduct individual interviews in a quiet and comfortable location within your community. I anticipate each interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes, with follow-up interviews to be scheduled, as needed. With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded, to be used solely for the purpose of transcription by no one other than myself, as the researcher.

As the researcher, I am committed to maintaining the utmost confidentiality and your comfort level. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym as a means to protect your identity. The use of a pseudonym will ensure you will never be associated with any scholarly presentations or publications related to this project. As with other interactions with your child’s school, all information provided through the interview process will be kept confidential with exception to that which I am required to report by law.

If you would prefer not to participate in this research project, it will in no way affect the services or support provided by the school. If you choose to participate, you have the right to decline any questions and the right to stop the interview at any time. As a small token of my appreciation, I will provide each household of the parent/guardian participant with a gift card to a local department store at the completion of the interview process.

Please complete and sign the included consent forms, keeping one for your records. The second copy can be returned to me in the included self-addressed stamped envelope. Once I have received the signed form I will contact you to schedule an interview accordingly.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Kelly Sculles, by e-mail at sculles2@gmail.com or by phone at (708) 899-2946. Additionally, you may contact Dr. Richard Hunter, Responsible Project Investigator (RPI) by e-mail at rchunter@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 333-1261. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, by e-mail at arobrtsn@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 244-0515.

“Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders”

Administrator Recruitment Letter and Consent

Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders is a research project, which seeks to understand the experiences of middle school students identified with chronic absenteeism. Through interviews, I, as a doctoral student and researcher, strive to understand absenteeism through the voice of those directly impacted by such experiences – students, their parents/guardians, and their building administrators.

At this time, I would like to invite you to participate in this study. If you agree, I would like to conduct individual interviews in a quiet and comfortable location within the school setting. I anticipate each interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes, with follow-up interviews to be scheduled, as needed. With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded, to be used solely for the purpose of transcription by no one other than myself, as the researcher.

As the researcher, I am committed to maintaining the utmost confidentiality and your comfort level. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym as a means to protect your identity. The use of a pseudonym will ensure you will never be associated with any scholarly presentations or publications related to this project. Also, please understand you have the right to decline any questions and the right to stop the interview at any time.

Please complete and sign the included consent forms, keeping one for your records. The second copy can be returned to me in the included self-addressed stamped envelope. Once I have received the signed form I will contact you to schedule an interview accordingly.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Kelly Sculles, by e-mail at sculles2@gmail.com or by phone at (708) 899-2946. Additionally, you may contact Dr. Richard Hunter, Responsible Project Investigator (RPI) by e-mail at rchunter@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 333-1261. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, by e-mail at arobrtsn@illinois.edu or by phone at (217) 244-0515.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders: *Tentative Student Interview Protocol*

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee – pseudonym:

(Briefly describe the project & interview procedures, ensure confidentiality, and remind the interviewee, he or she has the right to decline questions and/or the right to stop the interview at any time.)

Interview Questions:

(Initial questions are to put the student at ease.)

- Tell me a little about yourself – How old are you? What do you like to do in your spare time?
- How long have you been a student at _____ School?
- How would you describe your school? What is best thing about your school? The worst?
- How would you describe your attendance at school?
- How do you and/or your parents/guardians report your absences to the school?
- How do your teachers and/or the building administrator(s) respond to your absences?
- In what ways, if any, do you think your teachers and administrator(s) can support you in improving your attendance at school?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know?

(Thank the interviewee and review the next steps in the research project, as appropriate.)

Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders:
Tentative Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee name – pseudonym:

(Briefly describe the project & interview procedures, ensure confidentiality, and remind the interviewee, he or she has the right to decline questions and/or the right to stop the interview at any time.)

Interview Questions:

(Initial questions are to put the parent/guardian at ease.)

- How old is your child? What grade is he or she in?
- How long has your child been a student at _____ School?
- How would you describe the school?
- How would you describe your child's attendance at school?
- Does the school have you follow a specific protocol to report your child's absences? If so, please describe the protocol.
- How have the teachers and/or administrator(s) responded to your child's absences?
- In what ways, if any, do you think your child's teachers and administrator(s) can support your child in improving his or her attendance at school?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know?

(Thank the interviewee and review the next steps in the research project, as appropriate.)

Chronic Student Absenteeism: Implications for School Leaders:
Tentative Administrator Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee – pseudonym:

(Briefly describe the project & interview procedures, ensure confidentiality, and remind the interviewee, he or she has the right to decline questions and/or the right to stop the interview at any time.)

Interview Questions:

(Initial questions are to put the administrator at ease.)

- How long have you been an administrator?
- How long have you been an administrator at _____ School?
- How would you describe your school?
- How would you describe the overall attendance of the students in your school?
- Who's responsible for addressing student attendance concerns in your school? What are his/her responsibilities?
- Describe the current attendance practices in your building as they do or do not relate to any attendance policies that are in place.
- How do you see your role in responding to student attendance concerns?
- In what ways, if any, do you think you and your staff can better address student attendance concerns?
- Is there anything further, you might like to add?

(Thank the interviewee and review the next steps in the research project, as appropriate.)