ABSTRACT

Angie Renea Jenkins. EVALUATING A MULTI-MODAL INTERVENTION FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS WITHIN A TITLE I SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. R. Martin Reardon). Department of Educational Leadership, December 2022.

This study was designed to evaluate the outcome of an action research-oriented, multi-modal intervention intended to lessen chronic student absenteeism among students in Grade 1 through Grade 3 within a Title I district in North Carolina. The theory of action was that if the perception of the value of early education held by parents of chronically absent students was sharpened and the children themselves were (a) engaged positively as individuals on a daily basis with a specific adult and (b) rewarded for being present at school, then the children would attend school more consistently as evidenced by the school attendance records. Chronic absenteeism was a national problem among both high school and elementary school students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that absenteeism has worsened since the advent of COVID-19. The inherent complexity of absenteeism makes it even more challenging to address. Students in poverty were most susceptible to being chronically absent, thus widening the achievement gaps between them and their non-economically challenged peers. Researchers have suggested that parents' beliefs about the value of early education contribute to students' attendance patterns. The three-pronged intervention I implemented in this case study began by ascertaining parents' perceptions schoolwide of the value of schooling, focusing on a small number of children who are chronically absent and inviting their parents to enter into an ongoing dialog with me throughout the intervention during which their children engage positively on a daily basis with an adult in the school environment and were rewarded for consistent attendance.

EVALUATING A MULTI-MODAL INTERVENTION FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS WITHIN A TITLE I SCHOOL

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by
Angie Renea Jenkins
December, 2022

Director of Dissertation: R. Martin Reardon, PhD
Dissertation Committee Members:
Travis Lewis, EdD
Daniel Novey, EdD
Daphne Halkias, PhD

DEDICATION

For your relentless faith and perpetual support… Mom and Dad, I dedicate this work to you! This journey would have been virtually impossible had it not been for you. Thank you for reminding me throughout the years that, "...with people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" - Matthew 16:26 (NASB).

To my husband, Will and my baby and most favorite little human in the world, Amara, thank you for your selflessness and patience as I sacrificed time and attention from you both. I love you beyond words, and I also dedicate this work to you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey has been long and arduous, yet I am immensely grateful. A lot of ups and downs have happened along the way, all while creating endurance in me. When I look over the years, several lines from the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes come to mind:

> "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it, and splinters, and boards torn up, and places with no carpet on the floor - Bare. But all the time, Ise been a-climbin' on".

And I will continue to climb! I realize that my journey has been just as much for others as it has been for myself. It is my hope that it can be used to inspire others to keep persevering and to never let go of dreams regardless of how long or hard the road may seem.

There are so many that I would like to acknowledge and to thank. First and foremost, my deepest gratitude and praise goes to my Father in heaven. He is indeed a mighty good God! Thank you for carrying me in the most of times. Thank you for giving me the grace to push when it seemed that I had no more to give. Thank you for keeping me committed at the darkest of times as I not only lost my most precious baby girl, Micaiah Rose, but as I battled for my own dear life. After that period, I was not sure how I would make it through, but you knew that this day was inevitable and that it was all a part of my path and destiny. I will forever honor and give you praise for this you have done!

I have been blessed on my journey with the most dynamic support team one could ever have. I would like to thank my dissertation dream-team committee: my chair, Dr. R. Martin Reardon and my committee members, Dr. Travis Lewis, Dr. Daniel Novey, and Dr. Daphne Halkias. Your wisdom, support, compassion, and guidance along this journey has been

invaluable. You have challenged my thinking and helped me grow beyond my current context. I will indeed take all that I have gained throughout the rest of my journey.

I would like to thank and acknowledge my mentors… Dr. Daphne Halkias, to you I am forever indebted. You have walked alongside my doctoral journey for over 10 years. You have never stopped believing in me even when it appeared that my journey was over. I appreciate you for always being quick to encourage me and for helping me to navigate this process. You are not only my mentor, but I call you, my friend! And this friendship, my Greek guardian angel, I will forever cherish! Dr. Walter Boston, Jr, you sir, have been a trusted mentor, friend, and my pastor for over twenty years. Thank you for all that you have invested into my life and into this process. Thank you for the times you seeded gifts of time and resources so that I may be able to steal away to write. Thank you for also allowing me to step away from my responsibilities in ministry so that I could get this done. I appreciate you.

To all my friends and colleagues that have supported me, encouraged me, and cheered for me, I appreciate you! To my cohort comrades, Dr. Chanda Battle and Dr. William Artis, thank you for the many all-day writing sessions at the library and at other cool lunch spots. I appreciate the friendship and support that we provided one another throughout our journey. Together we have experienced so much… the loss of loved ones, career advancements, writer's block, and the stress of the process. And yet, we overcame; we made it! Dr. Monica Smith-Woofter, thank you for seeing something in me and encouraging me to apply to this program. Dr. Yanisha Mann, thank your always encouraging me, for the brainstorming sessions, and for simply being there for me to talk though my thoughts as I synthesize my research. Dr. Kanika Griffin, thank you for always checking in on me, cheering for me, and for always answering any questions that I may have had. Dr. Sherika Hill, you rock! Thank you for your sisterhood and for helping me to

embrace the fact that I belong in this space. Thank you to my west coast virtual library community of aspiring female doctors and master-level professions: Dr. Natalie Gasca, Dr. Juliana Sanchez, Dr. Juandalyn Burke, Vanessa Martinez, Dr. Sarah Chavez, Patricia Cabral, and Crystal Venegas. You provided me with true community and accountability in the loneliest of times and for that, I am forever grateful. Our virtual library hours were a tremendous blessing to me. I look forward to us staying connected and finally meeting each other in person.

I would also like to acknowledge and say thank you to all those that faithfully prayed for me. I particularly want to thank Pastor Terance Boothe, Sr. and the LOJ prayer line. I love how you guys have always celebrated when I celebrated, cried when I cried, and prayed when there were no other options, but to pray. I truly appreciate you all!

To my family, thank you for cheering me on and always celebrating my accomplishments. In your own special ways, you have simply showed up! I cannot thank you enough! I love you all!! Dad, this is our degree!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Sparks (2018), nearly 8,000,000 of our nation's children were considered chronically absent from school in the latest federal civil rights data reported by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). That number continues to rise (Sparks, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). When students miss school regularly, there are repercussions such as diminished academic success and an increased possibility of dropping out of school (Gottfried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014). This study examined chronic absenteeism related to elementary students—a demographic that makes up 11% of chronically absent students (NC Early Childhood Foundation, 2017). Research has validated that academic experiences early in a child's life have implications well into adulthood (Gottfried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014).

In this first chapter, I covered the background of this problem and how it impacted a Title I elementary school in which the majority of the student population was at a disadvantage economically. I then explored the specific purpose of this study and the research methodology that I used to make an impact on the problem. Following this, I addressed the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework that underpinned my study. Finally, I addressed a few additional areas to bring clarity to the study, such as outlining key terminology, discussing the scope and delimitations of the study, addressing the limitations related to the research methodology/design and potential biases, and discussing the significance of this study and how it could be used to inform future practice.

Background of the Study

Chronic absenteeism is a problem that exists across Progress Schools District (PSD, a pseudonym), a small, rural, low-performing Title I school district in North Carolina. A Title 1 school district is one in which financial assistance is granted through the Every Student Succeeds

Act (ESSA, 2015) to support a high number of children from low-income families so that they have a "significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps" (ESSA, n.d.). The problem of chronic absenteeism spans most of the schools and grade levels within PSD. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2016), the absenteeism rate for PSD for 2014-2015 was 16.6%. This placed PSD at 0.6%--slightly higher than the national average of 16% (Osborne, 2018; Sparks, 2018). Based on a recent report on chronic absenteeism of PSD as of 2019, the rate was 19%, which placed the district 8% higher than the goal of 11% established by the state (myFutureNC, 2020). The district would need 166 more of its 2,078 students to attend school regularly to meet the state goal.

My research focused on one of the elementary schools in PSD. Chronic absenteeism at the elementary school level is a significant concern since early academic success in elementary school positions students for success later in their educational careers (Chang & Romero, 2008). Triumph Elementary School (TES, a pseudonym) was the focus of my research for the following reasons: (a) a high chronic absenteeism rate, (b) a rating of "C" for academic status on the school report card developed by the state, and (c) its readiness as a small community school to implement a project that aimed to improve student outcomes through creative means.

Researchers have found that one of the major factors influencing attendance is the multifaceted impact of poverty (Cutillo, 2013; Isaacs, 2012). According to Isaacs (2012), poverty remains a key factor in school readiness as it contributes to many other factors that impede school attendance. Family poverty is particularly disheartening for elementary school children as it places them at a disadvantage academically, reduces their success rates, and amplifies the poverty gap within their families (Cutillo, 2013; Isaacs, 2012). Cutillo (2013) claimed that it was

normal to find one-fourth of the class missing every day in high poverty areas. As a result, I was inspired to examine absenteeism closely within the schools of PSD and determine the possible factors that affect it.

Researchers have also found that, outside of high school, the highest rates of absenteeism exist among kindergarten students (Cutillo, 2013; Gottfried & Gee, 2017). This is not due to students not wanting to be at school but to issues beyond students' control, such as parents having inflexible work schedules or unreliable transportation (Chang & Romero, 2008). As I examined this problem of practice (PoP) at the elementary school level, I determined that a framework for attendance built around a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) had the potential to guide my efforts to reach, educate, and empower parents to commit to ensuring that their children were attending school. The goal for a successful outcome was to ultimately improve the academic outcomes for chronically absent students who are at a disadvantage academically and for a school that consistently performs at a "C" school performance grade. In 2013, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Excellent Public Schools Act as Part IX of its Appropriations Act of 2013, requiring all North Carolina public and public charter schools to receive a performance grade of A-F (Public Schools First NC, 2020). This performance grade is based upon the calculation of 80% of the weight from standardized testing and 20% of school growth as measured by the SAS EVAAS (Education Value-Added Assessment System) for the K-12 system (https://www.sas.com/en_us/software/evaas.html).

Problem Statement

TES students have faced challenges that have impeded their ability to attain the level of success needed to consistently exceed academic growth and performance expectations. Many of those challenges included limited resources, lack of academic exposure, and inequitable access to

quality broadband, all of which are exacerbated by poverty. I provided a broad picture of the challenges that TES has encountered to provide further context to the PoP I focused on for this research study.

Approximately 66% of the students at TES are classified as economically disadvantaged, compared to 38.9% statewide (North Carolina School Department of Public Instruction, 2022). TES is thus designated as a Title 1 school. TES qualifies for this designation because of its high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The community that TES is embedded in is very small. As of 2019, the community demographics were 73.4% white, 19.2% Black, and 5.5% Hispanic. Of those residents, 24.5% live in poverty, of which 72.4% are Black residents (City-Data.com, 2022). TES school enrollment is 85% minority, with the predominant group being Black at 77% and Hispanic at 5% (Public School Review, 2022). These enrollments exceed the state minority enrollment of 52% (majority Black). The diversity enrollment score used by the state, measured from 0 to 1 with 1 indicating the greatest diversity, is at .39%.

In my conversation with the TES principal, the issue of chronic absenteeism was flying under the radar because the numbers were not as obvious as in other schools. However, after discussing the data, we realized that it was indeed a problem. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 exposed this problem even more. We realized that during the first quarter of the 2021-2022 school year, 47 out of 144 (32.6%) students had already missed five or more days of school. Upon further examination, we found that 13 of those students had already missed 10 days, with 19 days being the highest number. These data are of great concern as TES students continue to fall further behind academically.

According to national data reported by school districts to the U.S. Department of Education for the 2017-2018 academic year, the chronic absenteeism rate for TES was 11.6%

(Hamilton Project, 2021). In practical terms, approximately 19 students from the population were considered excessively absent— based upon the measure of 10% of the school year —during the 2017-2018 school year. Although TES does not have the highest absenteeism rate among the elementary schools in the district, it is an area of concern considering its mission to maintain the culture of a small community school and its goal to focus on the whole child.

Refining the Context

I had the opportunity to interview the TES principal regarding the school's absenteeism rate. The principal (personal communication, October 15, 2021) noted that the leadership team was not fully aware of the true nature of the problem. The problem was further masked by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as students were attending virtually for the majority of the previous year. She did realize that the students with problematic attendance appear to continue to fall further and further behind. The principal had designated the school social worker as a case manager to check in with families whose children were absent regularly. The social worker has been performing these duties with greater intentionality during the 2021-2022 school year, especially after the start of this study.

To further my understanding of the context, I talked with the school social worker regarding the reasons parents most frequently cited for student absenteeism. The school social worker (personal communication, November 5, 2021) noted reasons such as students missing the bus, lack of transportation, students oversleeping, and students being ill. The school social worker also noted that many students with problematic attendance were repeatedly absent from year to year. When the school social worker met with the parents, they stated that they did not realize the days were mounting up, although they had received written notification from the school. Additionally, in an informal conversation with several parents, one parent who is an

educator observed that students who tend to have the most absences have parents who are very young and may not have a complete understanding of the importance of their child being in school (personal communication, September 15, 2021).

Therefore, considering the challenges TES faced, the specific problem I addressed in this research was chronic absenteeism in Grade 1 through Grade 3. I also focused on parents' perceptions of the value of early education at TES. I addressed this problem from the broader environmental context—using Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory that focuses on multiple and overlapping environment factors/contexts that impact problematic attendance—and from a narrow context at the level of the family, in particular parental beliefs/perceptions of the value of attending school regularly.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my mixed methods, action research study was to implement an intervention to lessen chronic student absenteeism rates in Grade 1 through Grade 3 and sharpen parents' perceptions of the value of early education at TES. The mixed methods research design for my action research approach used both quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative data was collected from the PowerSchool database maintained by PSD to determine if there was an increase in school attendance from prior to the beginning of the study to the end of my study, where I introduced my intervention. I collected qualitative data using surveys and interviews from parents, teachers, and the intervention team regarding their perceptions of the context of the problem and the overall value of the intervention.

Key Terms

In the context of this study, several terms need to be defined to provide clarity throughout the study: chronic absenteeism or being chronically absent, ecological framework, and bioecological framework.

- The terms chronic absenteeism and problematic school attendance were used interchangeably throughout this research study. The criterion for chronic absenteeism and problematic attendance is the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) definition, which states that chronic absenteeism and problematic attendance involves a student missing 15 or more days out of school (Sparks, 2018).
- For the purposes of this study, chronic absenteeism and problematic attendance are specific to unexcused absences only, not tardiness. According to state law, absences are excused when a note with documentable reasons (i.e., illness, death in the family, doctor's appointment, etc.) has been submitted. When no such documentation has been presented, the absence is considered unexcused.
- The term truancy has been assigned by this state as the legal term for students that are chronically absent from the school setting without documentable cause (North Carolina Department of Safety [NCDPS], 2017). However, this term was not used in this study due to the varying definitions of truancy from state to state, some of which include chronic tardiness.
- Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework and Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological frameworks were both referenced in this study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework refers to the original framework by American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner that emphasized environmental factors that influence human

development. The ecological framework evolved as Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the role that the individual played in development; this revised framework was termed the bioecological framework.

Research Question(s)

My overarching research question was: To what extent can my intervention, implemented through an action research design, improve problematic school attendance among elementary students within a rural Title I school?

There are three supporting sub-questions that informed the overarching research question:

- RQ1: How do the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among parents of chronically absent students contribute to the problematic attendance of students in TES?
- RQ2: To what extent will a focused outreach revise the perceptions of parents of the educational importance of students attending school regularly?
- RQ3: What are the factors implicated in problematic attendance at TES (e.g., root cause, historical trajectory), and the ecological/cultural context of that problematic attendance?

Theoretical Foundation

There were several frameworks that were indicated and informed this study: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Simpkins et al., 2012). However, the main theoretical foundation that underpinned my project to address attendance at TES was Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2005).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological framework evolved from his original model, known as the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I discuss the evolution of Bronfenbrenner's theories in greater detail in Chapter 2. In the context of child development, Bronfenbrenner's theory provides insights into the relationship between a child's environmental influences and their development. The original underpinnings of this theoretical framework provided context for understanding the various environments, also known as ecological domains, that may influence an individual's development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), these influences can crossover and overlap within and across the ecological domains.

As summarized by The Psychology Notes Headquarters (n.d.), Bronfenbrenner (1979) initially established four levels/domains used to organize the contextual influences upon development. These ecological domains within this framework are microsystems (immediate environments such as family and school), mesosystem (interactions between different parts of microsystems), exosystem (wider environment), and macrosystem (social and cultural values). As the theory evolved, Bronfenbrenner (2005) included a fifth domain called the chronosystem. This domain introduced the dimension of time and its influence of "change and constancy" (The Psychology Notes Headquarters, n.d., para. 17).

Evaluating students' problematic attendance at TES through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theoretical framework enhanced my ability to explore the myriad of factors that influence students' lack of regular school attendance. It provided greater context and parameters relevant to the problem and the extent to which my attendance intervention positively impacted student attendance. The intervention that I implemented at TES to address problematic student attendance through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model

addressed the intricately overlapping challenges that impact student attendance. The anticipated outcome of my implementation was that it would increase student attendance, hence improving the school's absenteeism rate (defined by the OCR as missing 15 or more days of school) (Sparks, 2018).

I also explored Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Simpkins et al., 2012) in more context in Chapter 2. This theory purports that a parent's beliefs about an area (domain) or activity influences their behaviors towards encouraging their children's participation in that activity. It also points to the fact that parents' behaviors can influence a child's self-concept. This is particularly relevant when we examine parent perception around the value of education within this study.

Assumptions

Mertler (2019) declared that scholarly research is not void of assumptions. Assumptions are defined as assertions perceived by the researcher to be true, even though there is no existing evidence proving their validity. Assumptions can be made by the researcher or may be already presumed within a given construct or methodology (Creswell & Garrett, 2008; Wolgemuth et al., 2017). Such assumptions can influence how the researcher frames the research problem and arrives at a solution (Wolgemuth et al., 2017).

Several assumptions were inherent in my study. One methodological assumption was that within this mixed methods study, I would be able to integrate both quantitative and qualitative methods, which required mixing methods and paradigms, and that both methods would be compatible with one another (Greene & Caracelli, 2003). Hence, my assumption was that a mixed methods approach would provide greater validation of the effectiveness of my research intervention. This assumption did not relate to my desired outcome. I hoped that my mixed

methods approach would provide greater insight into my research questions. I purported that it would do so by providing elaboration and illustration of the results as it addressed the different parts of the phenomenon (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). My use of mixed methods in this study provided a voice to the participants involved in the study.

Another assumption was that parental beliefs and perceptions regarding the importance of early education were a significant factor contributing to chronic absenteeism among students at TES. I assumed that it would be possible that the parents perceived that early education was synonymous with a preschool setting where students tend to do more learning through play and socialization rather than through academic rigor and performance. I attempted to delve into the essence of this assumption using a survey to garner parents' perceptions of the value of early education. As I had hoped, this survey provided some interesting findings about this phenomenon.

Another assumption was that chronically absent children either endure discipline problems at school or home or are from economically disadvantaged families. Although these may have been two relevant factors (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2017), additional consideration within my study needed to be given to children who deal with chronic illnesses and other environmental factors. As this study progressed, I was cognizant of this very issue. As the parent of a child who suffered from frequent ear infections, I had to contend with my thoughts and feelings surrounding children chronically missing days from school. My experience helped me become more aware of the academic effects of missing school.

Lastly, one of my assumptions was that people would answer the interviews and surveys honestly. I assumed that they would perceive the benefit of being honest in contributing to the

advancement of the study. However, this may not have been the case, which led to the issue being a consideration.

Scope and Delimitations

This study examined problematic school attendance in Grade 1 through Grade 3 in one Title 1 school in a rural district in North Carolina. Within the limits of this study, I focused on chronic absenteeism. I utilized the criterion set forth by the OCR that defines students as chronically absent when they miss 15 or more days from school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

Limitations

According to Mertler (2019), limitations are occurrences outside of the researcher's control that may impact the study. One possible limitation was the accuracy of data entered at the teacher level into the state-wide data management system regarding student absences. In the current process, teachers enter student tardiness and absences as excused or unexcused. Excused absences have documentation, such as a note from a parent/guardian or physician.

Several issues exist concerning this practice, such as whether teachers enter documentation supporting excused absences or whether data are changed to reflect presence versus absence when students are only tardy. For some districts, accurate reporting becomes increasingly problematic in elementary schools, as attendance is only captured in the morning, unlike in secondary schools, where attendance is captured every period. This may lead to some challenges in identifying truly chronically absent students, such as those who might check out early on a regular basis.

Another limitation I considered involved the focus group session. I assumed that the session being made easily accessible to parents meant that they would participate. A limitation is

that their participation alone could indicate that they may be more involved in their child's schooling than other parents of students with problematic attendance.

Implications of COVID-19

COVID-19 had worldwide implications for education. There were disruptions in delivery format of education content, loss of instructional days, increase in student and staff absenteeism, and decrease in parental supports and engagement with the educational system. For this study specifically, there were direct impacts on study design and data collection. This study began in the Fall of November 2021 during the middle of second quarter. That was the first time students started school on time since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020. During the spring, schools across the country shut down abruptly, and students were forced to attend school virtually. During that time, schools were trying to acclimate to a new instructional format as a norm; attendance was not a primary consideration. The following spring, most public schools returned to the virtual format and operated as such throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year, with a few schools moving to a hybrid model of either virtual or in-person learning or a combination of both. Considering such, PSD as a district decided to opt for students to attend either virtually or in-person during the spring of 2021. PSD allowed flexibility in capturing student attendance as some students that were virtual lacked adequate broadband and had to find creative ways to show teachers that they were participating in learning. With that reality, attendance records may or may not have adequately reflected a student's commitment to being present during learning. However, as PSD schools moved back to their traditional in-person operations during the 2021-2022 school year, student attendance was captured consistently. I saw that chronic absenteeism was still an issue impacting students, possibly even to a greater magnitude. Student gaps were further exacerbated by their absence from the classroom during the pandemic. This fact provided

me with even more motivation to examine this phenomenon by implementing a protocol to encourage student attendance.

Significance of the Study

According to the 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection data report, 16% of our nation's school-aged students—about one in six students—have problematic school attendance (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Nationally, 11% of those students are elementary students (NC Early Childhood Foundation, n.d). These data expose racial and ethnic gaps among students with problematic school attendance. My research to explore this issue within my selected context may inform stakeholders on how to leverage resources and systematic support to assist students and families disadvantaged by rural and economic barriers.

At the national level, federal policymakers would do well to address problematic attendance issues by providing guidance and universally setting precedence so that states can implement policies that provide guidance to local educational institutions. Such policy guidance would set national standards requiring local districts to report their district's attendance data as a requirement of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), as initially set by President Barack Obama (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

An enhanced level of transparency is necessary to facilitate more research regarding student absenteeism at all levels. The availability of enhanced data would help to drive further research on mitigating problematic attendance, as there is a paucity of research that appropriately informs local entities (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Policy guidance from the national level would spur concerted efforts nationally to combat problematic attendance among our youth.

Within the local context, districts can utilize research to inform strategies and initiatives to address and combat attendance issues within their schools. The reality is that chronic

absenteeism thwarts students' growth, development, and academic success (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Students are at a significant disadvantage when they miss direct instruction within a supportive learning environment (Isaacs, 2012).

There is limited research into chronic absenteeism that has been conducted utilizing a multifaceted approach that recognizes multiple and interlocking factors that impede school attendance (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Hence, I approached this problem through Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems approach. The significance of this approach is that my research at TES was poised to be particularly beneficial in providing a lens through which other rural and economically disadvantaged schools can view the interlinking forces that influence problematic attendance, and potentially provide a model to aid them in addressing the issue.

Summary

In this chapter I provided the background of the problem of chronic absenteeism within TES. I explored the purpose of my study and the research methodology that I used to examine the problem. Following this, I briefly highlighted Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework as providing the theoretical underpinning of my study. I further provided clarity regarding the scope and nature of my research, its delimitations, and its potential limitations. My research methodology and intervention were outlined, and the potential biases that may impact my research study were explored. Finally, the significance of my study was addressed in the context of its potential to inform future practice. The following chapter includes the literature review, which will further examine the research regarding chronic absenteeism and its implications for elementary students.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Poor student attendance is a problem that exists in classrooms across the nation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Sparks, 2018). Regularly missing school has wide-reaching implications and has gained national attention as a result. Although research on the topic is growing, it is still limited. Much of the research on this issue focuses on the connection between chronic absenteeism and achievement (Cutillo, 2013; Issacs, 2012). This study will seek to explore both the root causes of the problem and whether parental beliefs influence parents' decision to send their children to school.

Although the highest incidences of chronic absenteeism are reportedly among high school students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Cutillo, 2013), chronic absenteeism exists in high numbers among elementary students (Chang & Romero, 2008). When students miss prolonged amounts of time out of school during a school year, regardless of whether the reason is excused or unexcused, they are then classified as chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008). There have been multiple definitions of chronic absenteeism. It has been defined as absence from school for 10% of the school year or even missing a month of school in total (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). However, for the purpose of my study, I will use the federal OCR definition of missing 15 or more days from school (Sparks, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

In the following literature review, I will examine the context of the problem of chronic absenteeism among elementary students. My literature review is a synthesized examination of the literature and evaluates a framework through which my research questions can be explored and evaluated. The articles reviewed within my study were found in searches through Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, and ERIC via the U.S. Department of Education. The

key terms used in the searches were *chronic absenteeism, attendance, absenteeism and elementary students, parental beliefs, Bronfenbrenner bioecological systems theory,* and *absenteeism and poverty*.

Frameworks to Evaluate the Problem

The theories that I used provided support for an intervention aimed at reducing problematic absenteeism and targeting parental beliefs and behaviors regarding school attendance. These theories are Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (revised from his original theory; Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Simpkins et al., 2012). These theories are categorized into subheadings in this study for clarity.

Evaluating parental beliefs around the importance of their children attending school is paramount to developing an intervention to address chronic absenteeism. Hence, Eccles's expectancy-value theory is relevant for evaluating parents' perceived value of education (Simpkins et al., 2012). This model posits that a parent's beliefs about a domain influence their behaviors towards encouraging their children's participation in that domain. It further asserts that parents' behaviors influence the child's concepts about themselves. Additionally, Eccles's expectancy-value model provides a framework for understanding how parents make decisions for their children based on their expectations and values.

Academic Success

A significant determinant of academic success for students is showing up for school as early as preschool (Cutillo, 2013; Issacs, 2012; Morrissey et al., 2014). Children showing up for school has been positively correlated with successful academic performance (Gottfried, 2011; Morrissey et al., 2014). Research has shown that children with regular school attendance early in their school life are more likely to be proficient readers by the end of Grade 3 than students with

high absenteeism (Attendance Works, 2014). Research further indicates that students who are considered readers by Grade 3 are more likely to graduate from high school and earn better wages as adults (Cutillo, 2013; Issacs, 2012).

Absence from school places children at a disadvantage; they miss out on optimal learning opportunities fostered by direct-teacher instruction, individual interactions with lessons, and peer engagement (Morrissey et al., 2014). School attendance in the early years has been found to be an indicator of academic success in later years (Morrissey et al., 2014). Hence, if students are not attending school regularly, their future success may be in jeopardy.

The Extent of the Problem

Chronic absenteeism among elementary students has attracted much attention due to its academic effects and potential long-term implications (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014). Although it remains a topic of conversation among policymakers and researchers, empirical research into the issue is sparse (Gottfried, 2014; Sugrue et al., 2016). Much of the existing literature is limited in terms of evaluating and identifying effective interventions and empirical connections between chronic absenteeism and the intervention being studied (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Consequences of Missing School

Other research related to absenteeism has examined its link to academic achievement, dropout probability, socioeconomic effects, and student retention (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2017; Goffried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014). Most prevalent within the literature is the link to academic achievement. Although chronic absenteeism can be observed on every level, it appears that elementary school and high school—the youngest and oldest students—have the highest rates of absenteeism (Aucejo & Romano, 2016; Balfanz & Byrnes,

2012). Missing school has adverse achievement outcomes impacting students as early as kindergarten, with detrimental implications that carry over into later academic experiences (Gottfried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014). Some indicators emerge as early as Grade 3 when students are expected to become fluent readers. Educators and policymakers have long acknowledged that falling behind in Grade 3 is correlated with high school dropout rates (Cutillo, 2013; Issacs, 2012).

Gottfried (2014) utilized a national data set of kindergarten students from the 2010-2011 school year to evaluate the effect of being chronically absent on achievement and socioeconomic outcomes. The results suggested that chronic absenteeism reduces math and reading achievement, educational engagement, and social engagement. According to Gottfried, the study offered evidence on how absenteeism or missing school impedes students' attainment. Similarly, Gershenson et al. (2017) used longitudinal data from a national survey and administrative records from North Carolina to investigate absences and academic performance. The results indicated that the detrimental effects of missing school were statistically significant for both math and reading, where one standard deviation increase in absences was associated with declines in reading and math achievement test scores by .02 and .04, respectively. Earlier research by Gottfried (2011) pointed to a strong correlation between higher absences and performance on standardized tests. Such connections make a strong case that students need to be in school and that their absences affect their academic success.

Gottfried (2011) wanted to evaluate the relationship between absences and achievement, although he recognized that much of the existing research might include bias because it did not account for family and household attributes. Controlling for family-specific omitted variable bias, Gottfried used a family fixed effects model, in which random effects are fixed, and a single

effect is accounted for within a model to control for unpredicted variance. By using the fixed-family model, Gottfried anticipated that he would potentially be able to suggest causality between absences and achievement. He used this family fixed effects model with a longitudinal focus on a five-cohort sample of elementary-age siblings over six years within a large urban district. Gottfried (2011) aimed to obtain the true effect of student absences on individual test performance.

Gottfried's (2011) findings yielded a significant negative relationship between absences and achievement. Even when controlling for the range of student, neighborhood, teacher, and classroom characteristics, absences were significantly and negatively related to reading academic performance. The number of days absent was statistically significant in relation to a decline in reading test performance. Gottfried's study supported and expanded upon previous research by establishing a statistically significant negative relationship between absences and achievement. By incorporating a model of family fixed effects and controlling for factors such as school effects, teachers, and neighborhood, he reduced the amount of bias typically present in these types of studies. Although Gottfried (2011) acknowledged that some bias must still be accounted for, he presented a strong case for absenteeism reducing successful academic outcomes for students.

Policy and Future Research Considerations

Research, although limited, has pointed to the need for policymakers and districts alike to address the problem of chronic absenteeism. However, it remains unmeasured and undocumented as educational systems lag in actively tackling it (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Gershenson et al. (2017) reported results from their study that suggested that student learning and achievement can be increased by reducing absenteeism. They also suggested that future

research should be geared toward understanding absenteeism on multiple levels, such as "how household and neighborhood characteristics, as well as school and classroom policies, influence attendance" (Gershenson et al., 2017, p. 30), hence considering absenteeism from a bioecological approach. When examining absenteeism through a bioecological approach, we gain a greater understanding of all the factors that influence parents' decisions to send or not to send their children to school (Sugrue et al., 2016). Factors such as family environment, school culture, and economic status are among the variables that must be considered (Sugrue et al., 2016; Van Eck et al., 2017).

Despite the implications of missing school for academic success, limited research draws correlations between chronic absenteeism and gender and ethnicity (Morrissey et al., 2014). However, among existing research, the consensus is that missing school hurts all children and puts them at a disadvantage. Each day students have an opportunity to learn both formally and informally, and when they do not attend school, they cannot benefit from such rich learning experiences (Cole, 2011). Missing school means missing out on direct access to teacher-led instruction, peer interaction, and learning opportunities; this significantly impedes successful learning outcomes (Morrissey et al., 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that unexcused absences have a greater correlation with lower achievement outcomes than excused absences (Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2014). Unexcused absences, in contrast to excused absences, may be associated with a lack of educational engagement.

Role of Parental Beliefs and School Attendance

Researchers have found a correlation between parents' beliefs about the value of early education and student attendance (Robinson et al., 2018). While parents are typically optimistic about their child's outcomes, their feelings toward education may be most influenced by their

personal experiences. For example, if the parent had a positive educational experience, they are likely to anticipate positive outcomes for their child, and vice versa. Those beliefs can become determinants of whether parents will be active participants in their child's educational experience (Simpkins et al., 2012).

Expectancy-Value Model

A useful theoretical framework for evaluating parents' perceived value of education is Eccles's Expectancy-Value Model (Simpkins et al., 2012). This model posits that a parent's beliefs about a domain influence their behaviors towards encouraging their children's participation in that domain. It further asserts that parents' behaviors influence the child's concepts about themselves. Additionally, Eccles's Expectancy-Value Model provides a framework for understanding how parents make decisions for their children based on their expectations and values. The model contends that "(a) parents' beliefs about a domain shape parents' behaviors geared towards promoting children's engagement in that domain; (b) parents' behaviors, in turn, influence youths' self-concepts and task values (i.e. youths' motivational beliefs); and (c) these motivational beliefs predict adolescents' subsequent behaviors" (Simpkins et al., 2012, p. 1,019).

To investigate this theory, Simpkins et al. (2012) tested a development model that spanned a 12-year period examining mothers' beliefs about their children during their elementary years and how those beliefs are associated with "adolescents' achievement-related behaviors" (p. 1,019). The study involved mothers within four achievement domains: sports, instrumental music, reading, and math. Two of them are voluntary domains, and two are mandatory activities. The study measured parents' beliefs, parents' behaviors, youth motivational beliefs, and youth behaviors.

Based on the parents' beliefs, several key elements relevant to my study were apparent. Simpkins et al.'s (2012) findings supported Eccles's Expectancy-Value Model in that mothers' beliefs predict mothers' behaviors. Mothers are much more likely to be involved in activities that support their belief systems, particularly those that align with what they perceive as their children's ability and the value of participating in a particular domain. Also, it is essential to note that mothers' beliefs influenced their children's achievement motivations. These factors were replicated in three of the four domains tested. However, greater associations were found among leisure activities than mandatory activities.

Model Intervention

Robinson et al. (2018) expanded the reach of Eccles's Expectancy-Value Model by examining whether parents' beliefs can be revised regarding the value of early education in order to reduce student absenteeism. Within their study, Robinson et al. (2018) developed an intervention using an informational campaign to target "commonly held" (p. 1,169) beliefs by parents that undervalued the importance of regular school attendance in early grades as well as the number of days their child missed from school. Again, as noted by Simpkins et al. (2012), if one can change parents' beliefs, one can change their behaviors.

Robinson et al.'s (2018) study entailed a randomized field experiment in 10 school districts (totaling 10,967 households) across varied demographical areas, directed toward parents of medium-to-high-absence students in kindergarten through Grade 5. The intervention consisted of personalized messages that addressed the value of students attending school regularly in early grades and an accurate report of the number of days their child had missed from school. Households were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Participants were placed

randomly in one of three groups: (a) mail only, (b) mailing plus support, and (c) a control group that did not receive any information.

Robinson et al.'s (2018) study confirmed that if an intervention addresses the parents' beliefs, parents may then change their behaviors. They found that students whose parents were assigned to the "mail only" and the "mailing plus support" conditions were absent less frequently than those whose parents were in the control group and did not receive any information. Students from the households that received the mailings that included student attendance records tended to be absent 0.53 fewer days than those from households that did not receive feedback on the number of days missed. Robinson et al. found an overall 7.7% reduction in days missed, equating to an average of 6.37 days missed on average, compared to 6.9 days within the control group. Robinson et al. noted that the treatment effect was greater for both English Language Learners (ELL) and those that are socially and economically disadvantaged. The overall importance of this study is that it showed that targeting parents' beliefs through a targeted effort reduced chronic absenteeism by 15% (Robinson et al., 2018). I will model my parent outreach campaign on this study based on its impact on reducing absenteeism.

The Ecology of Absenteeism

My experience of many years in public education leads me to suggest that no one factor contributes to why students miss school regularly. As research examines absenteeism through multiple lenses, an ecological lens focuses on the underlying influences that various contexts may have upon problematic attendance among elementary students. An ecological lens examines a problem such as chronic absenteeism and the influence that complex relationships within an individual's environment, such as family dynamics or cultural norms or laws, may have upon them (Guy-Evans, 2020).

According to Gottfried (2014), most research has attempted to pinpoint specific causes for chronic absenteeism; however, the reasons surrounding chronic absenteeism are a matter of complex and often overlapping factors. Gottfried highlighted the need to examine causes for absenteeism from a broader context instead of seeing this issue as stemming simply from a child's immediate environment or a single isolated cause. I agree with Gottfried that it is necessary to review the issue from a broad perspective because I have found that issues impacting student behavior and attendance patterns tend to be convoluted. Gottfried's research pointed to multiple ecological/bioecological layers that have socioemotional, economic, and biological implications that collectively affect whether students come to school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Sugrue et al., 2016). Despite the plethora of overlapping influences that can impact the attendance of students within the early years (Sugrue et al., 2016), in my experience, I have found that parental decisions and beliefs about the importance of school have the greatest control over whether a child attends school (Robinson et al., 2018).

Sugrue et al. (2016) applied an ecological approach by using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological theory framework within their study. Bronfenbrenner developed this theory to study the complex relationship and influence that an individual's environment has on their development. Sugrue et al. used this framework to examine the overlapping ecological influences on truancy among elementary students. Their research applying this framework provided the most comprehensive context on the topic at that point in time. However, it is lacking in three aspects: (a) it focused on truancy versus chronic absenteeism in its truest sense; (b) it was based on an earlier rendition of Bronfenbrenner's theory instead of his revised version, which eventually evolved into the bioecological theory that may be most applicable in today's context;

and (c) it did not address the role that parental perception and parental decisions play in whether students attend school.

Ecological Systems Approach

Evaluating the issues surrounding problematic attendance from a holistic perspective may enable districts and policymakers to create efficient interventions rather than making sporadic efforts aimed at individual issues. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory (originally the ecological systems theory; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a lens through which to view chronic absenteeism. Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-American development psychologist, is known for his integral part in co-founding America's Head Start pre-kindergarten program (American Psychological Association, 2004). His bioecological systems theory offers a theoretical framework for obtaining a greater understanding of the complex and overlapping influences that impact chronic absenteeism among elementary students.

Existing research has highlighted various causes impacting elementary students' problematic attendance, such as poverty and transportation (Chang & Romero, 2008; Gershenson et al., 2017), with each cause often evaluated individually and in isolation. However, evaluating the problem using Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory allows for the consideration that not just one or two factors influence a child's development, but rather that there can be multiple factors that overlap with one another across multiple domains. These domains, also known as systems, are levels of influence within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. According to this theory, there are four domains involved in the development process: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

Each system is composed of its own unique context. However, the synergistic effects of two or more domains and processes within each influence an individual's development. The

microsystem consists of the developing person and their interactions within their immediate environment, such as relationships within the home, church, school, or neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The mesosystem is the relationship between the "linkage" of two or more settings consisting of the individual, such as the relationship between home and school or home and the neighborhood. The exosystem consists of two or more settings where one of which does not include the individual, such as the relationship between home and decisions made by the parent's job. Finally, the macrosystem consists of the "overarching" layer of influence exerted by culture, belief systems, and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Evaluating chronic absenteeism through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, coupled with the part that parents' beliefs play, provides a valuable examination of the problem in relation to elementary students, particularly those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or living in poverty (Robinson et al., 2018). The context of poverty would typically fall within one of the domains such as the macrosystem, yet, in my experience and from my assessment of the literature, poverty is a pervasive theme as it relates to children most often chronically absent. Thus, the effects of poverty should be strongly considered when examining student absenteeism from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory framework. Much of the research into student absenteeism shows that the highest instances of chronic absenteeism occur among children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or living in poverty (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2017). To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the problem, it is essential to first understand Bronfenbrenner's systems framework.

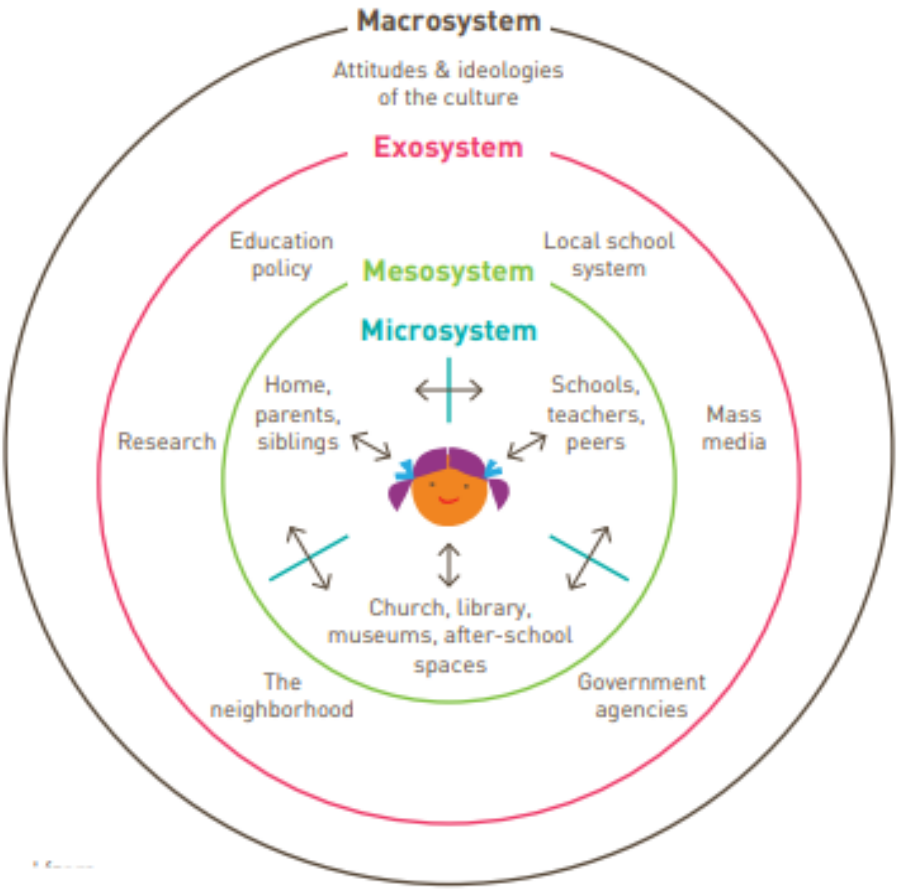
Chronic Absenteeism Using Bronfenbrenner's Original Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological theory (see Figure 1) suggests an interlinking context consisting of the factors that contribute to student absenteeism. It explains how various environmental systems influence the developing individual. An example of such is the high absenteeism rate in kindergarten. A contributor to high absenteeism among kindergartners may be a process within the exosystem known as compulsory educational laws, which give the perception that kindergarten is optional (Chang & Romero, 2008). This law dictates that children must start school around age 6, versus age 5 when children enter kindergarten. As a result, parents may not value a kindergarten education, likening it to preschool and not sensing the urgency to send their children to school. In other words, it provides a context for the interactions between the individual and the environment systems that influence students.

Relative to child development, Bronfenbrenner's theory applies context and insights into a child's perceived connections, their relationship with domain elements, and how they influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I will explore those domains in greater depth.

Microsystem

The first domain that Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed was the microsystem. The microsystem refers to a child's immediate surroundings and their direct interaction within their environment. Microsystems consist of those occurrences, objects, and people the child interacts with that garner the child's active engagement. They consist of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing child in their immediate environment. Because the child directly experiences the activities, roles, and relationships within their easy reach, these processes were described as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The



Note. (McClure et al., 2017, p. 13).

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Original Ecological Systems Theory.

developmental settings most conducive to the operation of proximal processes consist of, for example, the home, school, neighborhood, and religious setting. As it relates to elementary students who are chronically absent, the microsystem can entail a child contending with homelessness or going to bed hungry. Children may also be spending restless nights alone because their parent(s) are working or out indulging in activities such as drugs (Cutillo, 2013; Van Eck et al., 2017). These microsystem factors are likely to influence whether children make it to school or not.

Mesosystem

When a child begins to make connections among the events within their immediate world across settings such as home and school and recognizes those connections, a sense of mesosystem emerges (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's original theory established several ways the mesosystem occurs, yet the most critical is the direct link between two settings. Direct linkage or interconnection occurs between two settings when the developing child actively participates in both settings (i.e., when the child spends time both at home and school). The child further engages in optimal conditions by which the connections between the two settings the child is involved in can be both established and maintained. Such optimal conditions establish the strength of the relationships and interactions between the two settings. For example, frequent interactions or communications between home and school characterize optimal conditions. This form of dyadic functioning (strong two-way interactions) is the "prototype for defining optimal conditions" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 218). When conditions are not optimal, potential issues arise.

Sugrue et al. (2016) discussed how issues within the mesosystem domain—particularly conflict between school and home—can create barriers that impede school attendance. In their

study, community caseworkers who worked with truancy cases reported that the most problematic mesosystem factor was communication challenges between school and home. These challenges raised barriers to understanding for parents regarding policies and procedures such as student attendance at school and the laws that govern it. As a result of poor communication, negative feelings towards the school staff may develop. Such negative feelings can shape parents' perception of the school and further contribute to parents not valuing the importance of sending their children to "that" school.

Exosystem

The exosystem, as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), consists of one or more settings that do not involve active engagement by the child yet exert a developmental influence. For an exosystem to exist, a "causal sequence" (p. 237) must exist. A causal sequence would consist of an action or decision that directly impacts the child from a setting that does not directly include the child (i.e. the school board revising the grading policy to a 10-point scale from the original 7-point scale). The first step within the sequence is a connection between an external setting to processes within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example of this step would be the school board policy revising the grading policy. The second is linking the processes to the changes within the person in that microsystem. An example of this step would be if the revised grading policy moved the child's grade point average from a letter grade of "C" to a "B."

The exosystem is essentially an extension of the mesosystem with specific social structures that infringe upon what occurs within the immediate setting in which the individual is found (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). For example, Sugrue et al. (2016) found that community caseworkers cited issues such as parents' employment schedules and work-related responsibilities as often impacting students' ability to attend school. One

caseworker highlighted how parents' night work schedule affected an elementary student's ability to get up and get ready for school.

Such exosystem factors lie outside a child's control yet may affect their academic outcomes. The cause-and-effect sequence is apparent in two examples from Sugrue et al.'s (2016) study. In the first case, the parent's work responsibilities—imposed by an employer—cross over and affect the child's microsystem, their school attendance. In the second case, the parent's schedule again impedes the child's school attendance because their academic success is linked to successful school attendance (Gottfried, 2014).

Macrosystem

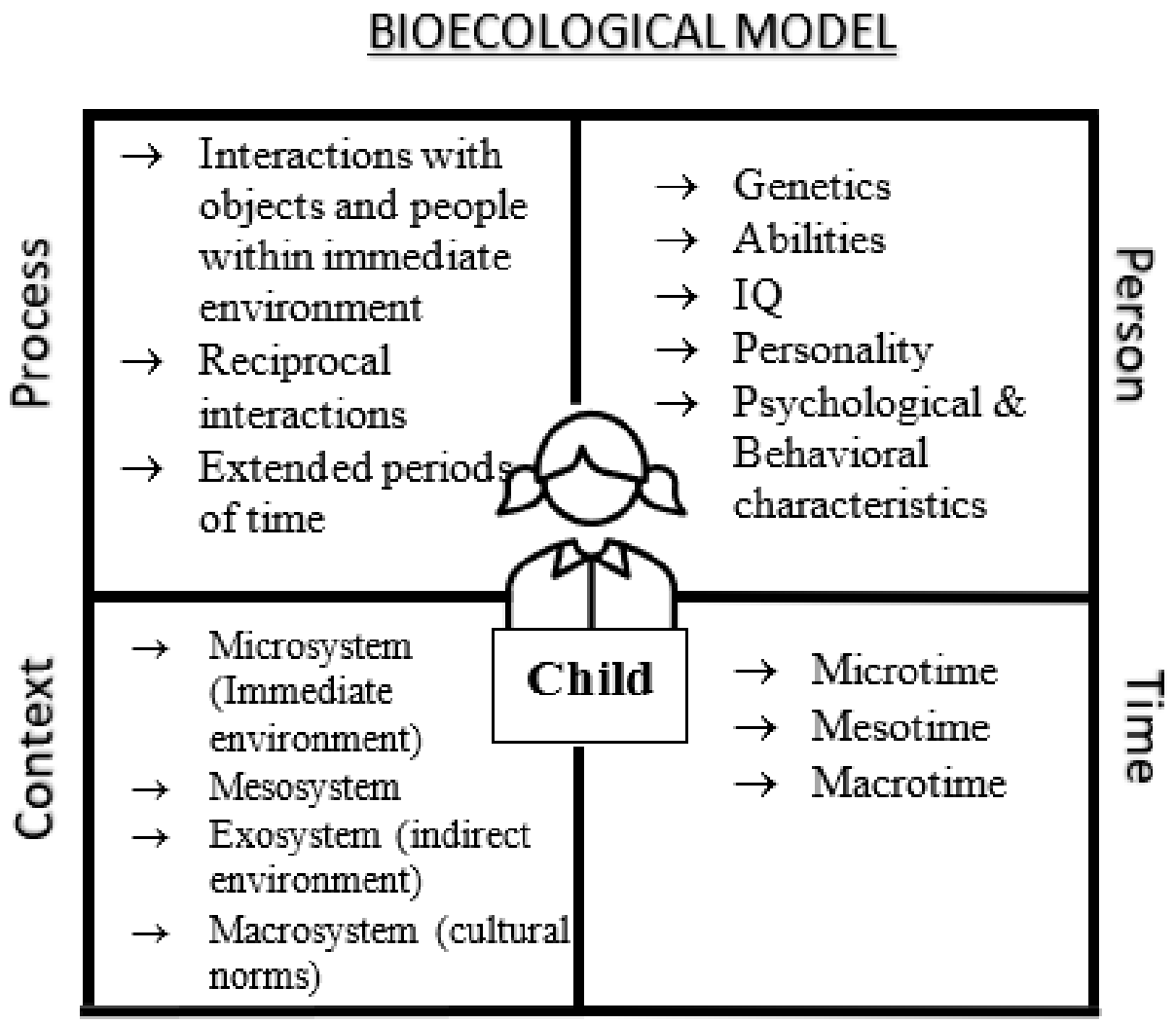
The macrosystem—the last of the four domains—involves larger systems of consistent patterns such as culture, economics, belief systems or ideologies, and political systems that influence the individual's development and existence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Issues within the macrosystem that may influence chronic absenteeism include poverty, laws and public policies, and conflict around an individual's ethnic community (Sugrue et al., 2016). Factors existing within this domain may take precedence over school attendance. If a family contends with hunger, lack of housing, and transportation issues, sending their child to school may be secondary. It poses a potential burden and may not be a priority for the family.

Updating the Ecological Systems Theory Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provided insight into the influences within a setting or an environment that impact an individual's development and experiences. However, Bronfenbrenner's theory has been revised from the original ecological theory of 1979 to the current bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This evolutionary revision occurred through the continuous work on theories of human development

with which Bronfenbrenner was engaged, making connections "from biology through the broadest level of the ecology of human development" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xv). Bronfenbrenner (2005) reformulated his theory to integrate the features of the developing person within the ecological systems and thus proposed the bioecological systems theory. This expansion emphasized the need to study not just the settings that the individual interacts with but also the individual's actual relations with that setting—the personal makeup of the individual and the makeup of those within the setting, the individual's development over time and the era in which they live, and the proximal processes that impact development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) now considers individual structures and functions biologically, psychologically, and behaviorally "fused dynamically with the ecological systems" described within his original theory (p. xiv). The bioecological systems theory brings greater consideration of the microsystem as it highlights the developing biopsychosocial person regularly interacting with relationships (i.e., parents, teachers, close friends, mentors), activities, and roles over an extended period. From the study of human development, the growth of the bioecological systems theory of human development—combined with the research model known as the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (see Figure 2)—Bronfenbrenner provided a framework for studying human development over time. Throughout the revision, the fundamental tenets of the theory were maintained even as the terminology evolved. An example of the evolution is Bronfenbrenner's (2005) replacement of the terms microsystem, macrosystem, mesosystem, and exosystem with more general terms such as interconnected systems. Framing my study in terms of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory framework invites greater attention to context and the possible influences on regular school attendance. It allows me to consider the factors that may be occurring in a child's



Note. I constructed this figure based upon Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) figure and Koller et al. (2020).

Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological PPCT Model.

life within their microsystem, such as a parent's negative beliefs about the child's school. It also allows me to understand the impact that the exosystem may have on the family's situation, such as their access to community resources or nonflexible work schedules.

Bioecological Systems Theory Framework

When I first discovered Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) through my literature search, I did not realize much this theory had grown and expanded. Through my literature search, I have learned that Bronfenbrenner was continually finding ways to grow and clarify his original theory to strengthen human development and ecology research. Throughout his writings, he was very transparent about the flaws that he saw in the development of the theory, its corresponding research designs, and the development of research contributing to the field of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Although it took decades for his thinking to reach maturity, throughout its iterations, the work inspired by his theory has provided rich insights into the scientific study of human development over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). However, the challenge has been for many researchers to implement his theories into either a testable model and/or in applied research settings (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). There has been ample criticism of studies that have not adequately implemented this model and criticism regarding Bronfenbrenner's inability to provide a model that was easy to implement (Tudge et al., 2016).

The Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Model

The Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) lays out the evolution of the bioecological theory and its relationship to the ecological theory. Combining new and old elements, the successor theory moved away from ecology (or environment) as the driver of the theory but not proximal processes. Proximal processes exist as

a function of the first of the four foundational and interrelated functions of human development, called process. The four functions, process, person, context, and time, are referred to as the PPCT model, as shown in Figure 2. This model is useful for understanding and researching interconnected systems of development.

Within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) revised model, which introduced the PPCT model, process functions as the model's core (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The use of process emerged as Bronfenbrenner began examining human development beyond ecology. Bronfenbrenner considered the developing person within the environment and in the context of the processes that influence development. Koller et al. (2020) defined process as "the dynamic transactions between the developing person and the environment" (p. 158). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) explained the properties of the model in their Proposition I:

> Especially in its early phases, but also throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes. Examples of enduring patterns of proximal process are found in feeding or comforting a baby, playing with a young child, child-child activities, group or solitary play, reading, learning new skills, athletic activities, problem solving, caring for others in distress, making plans, performing complex tasks, and acquiring new knowledge and know-how. (p. 797)

Various forms of bi-directional interaction between the developing person and their environment constitute the proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Koller et al.,

2020). For the interaction to be considered a part of the proximal process, it must occur over time and have the capacity to influence the developing person. The power of these types of processes lies in their influence on development. That influence may vary based upon the characteristics of the developing person and their context within a specified period of time that allow for a "proximal process" to be established (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 797). Otherwise, the interaction is not a proximal process; it is merely a process or an occurrence.

Regarding process and proximal processes, it is necessary to point out that this most typically occurs with the microsystem. The microsystem is the environment in which the child has relationships and interactions with their parents and family, particularly the "immediate environment" that was referenced in Proposition I, at least early in life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 797). It must be further noted that proximal processes are "simultaneously and synergistically" (Tudge et al., 2016, p. 429) influenced by the developing person's characteristics and contexts.

The next two parts of the PPCT model, person and context, deal with the developing person and the context (environment) in which they interact directly or indirectly. Koller et al. (2020) defined "person" (p. 158) as the characteristics of the developing person and "context" (p. 158) as the physical and social environments that shape the developing person's everyday experiences. The characteristics that define the developing person can include personality, background, biological makeup, and abilities (Koller et al., 2020). These characteristics affect how the individual interacts within their context and thus influence the outcomes of proximal processes. The context involves the four systems outlined in Bronfenbrenner's original theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Lastly, the concept of time is the only concept that was expanded from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original theory. The consideration of time within the model is integral in understanding the power of proximal processes in that development varies "substantially as a function of the characteristics of the developing Person, of the immediate and more remote environmental Contexts, and the Time periods, in which the proximal processes take place" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 795). Hence, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) conceptualized time as functioning on three levels: microtime, mesotime, and macrotime. Microtime is the "continuity versus discontinuity in ongoing episodes of proximal process" (p. 796). Mesotime is the broader period of time in which an episode occurs, such as days and weeks, such as changes in living situations or some significant life experience (Koller et al., 2020). Lastly, macrotime deals with cultural considerations and changing events within society across generations as they affect human development over one's life span. An example noted by Koller et al. would be a family history of homelessness or some major political transition. Macrotime essentially focuses on how experiences play out over time and across generations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Poverty and Chronic Absenteeism

Although my understanding is that there are multiple factors—often complex and interwoven—that lead to chronic absenteeism, there tend to be higher instances of absenteeism among students who are labeled as socioeconomically disadvantaged and those who are English language learners (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2017). The lower the family income, the higher the likelihood of absenteeism (Romero & Lee, 2007). Students in poverty are three to four times more likely to be chronically absent than their non-disadvantaged peers (Chang & Romero, 2008). Nauer et al. (2014) found that persistent chronic absenteeism strongly corresponded with deep poverty rooted within students' lives. When these students were absent,

it further widened the achievement gap, as children in poverty are already at a disadvantage compared to non-disadvantaged students before entering kindergarten (Issacs, 2012; Ready, 2010). Chang and Romero (2008) noted that poor children who were chronically absent in kindergarten were amongst the lowest math and reading performers in Grade 5. However, their deficiencies became evident as early as Grade 1. Essentially, missing school compounded over the years further exacerbated deficiencies. It became more challenging for students in disadvantaged households to make up for the loss of instruction than was the case for their non-disadvantaged peers.

Many socioeconomically disadvantaged students are dealing with systemic barriers that exacerbate their situations, as well as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that negatively influence their ability to attend school regularly (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Cutillo, 2013; Morris et al., 2017; Morrissey et al., 2014). The barriers that stressed families face often include a lack of resources, transportation, food insecurity, limited access to health care, and insufficient employment (Chang & Romero, 2008). These barriers often lead to ACEs ranging from homelessness, mobility issues, and unstable living situations (Ready, 2010) to severe health conditions brought on by poor living conditions or insufficient access to healthcare (Morris et al., 2017). Considering such barriers, it is not surprising to find one-fourth of a class missing on any given day in high poverty areas (Cutillo, 2013).

Ready (2010) studied poverty and its effects on school attendance by investigating the degree to which students from differing social classes with differing school attendance rates compared academically in literacy and math. Ready used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) to show the relationship between social class, attendance, and children's academic development. The ECLS-K is a longitudinal study by

the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education that pulls rich national data on children's development and early experiences from kindergarten to Grade 5 school years (NCES, n.d.). The ECLS-K population was chosen from approximately 1,000 public and private schools that offered kindergarten programs. The target sample for Ready's study consisted of about 24 students from each school. Students were chosen if they advanced to Grade 1 following their 1998-1999 kindergarten year, had not changed schools and had at least two of four test scores in literacy and math. Ready's data were pulled from the first four "data waves of ECLS-K, which included information on the same children in the fall and spring of kindergarten (waves 1 and 2) and the fall and spring of first grade, with a random subsample in the fall (waves 3 and 4)" (p. 274). Ready used data from the 1998-1999 data set consisting of 21,260 students.

The data in which Ready (2010) was interested included measures of the number of days students were absent in kindergarten and Grade 1. It also provided a continuous measure of the child's socioeconomic status and a composite of the parent's income, education, and occupational prestige. Other variables such as race, age, primary language, and whether the child was retained were also captured.

Ready (2010) addressed three research questions, the first of which related to social status and absenteeism: "descriptively, how can we characterize the relationship between social class and student attendance during kindergarten and first grade?" (p. 274). Ready examined group means using ANOVAs and chi-squares to measure statistical significance among within-school relationships. Based upon these tests, relationships between social class, school absences, and academic development during kindergarten and Grade 1 were established. The results showed that a "one-third standard deviation SES gap separates children with good versus poor

kindergarten attendance" (Ready, 2010, pp. 276-277) with an effect size of 0.366 ($p < .001$) and a slightly smaller "social class disparity" (Ready, 2010, p. 277) distinguishes students with good versus poor Grade 1 attendance with an effect size of 0.239 ($p < .001$).

Thus, Ready (2010) found a statistically significant difference between attendance and social class among kindergartners, where the magnitude of the relationship between the SES gap of good vs poor student attendance is medium. There is a slighter difference in the magnitude of effect with Grade 1 students with poor and good attendance, with the effect size being small. In other words, kindergarten students who are not socioeconomically disadvantaged tend to show up to school more often than their disadvantaged peers. This finding also holds for Grade 1 students, although not to the same extent (Ready, 2010).

Ready (2010) also found that family SES is negatively related to absences. Other determinants were found as well, such as that one out of three children with poor attendance lived in single-parent homes, in contrast to fewer than one out of four who had good attendance. Additionally, Ready found a significant difference between students of differing races. White and Asian students were less chronically absent than non-white and non-Asian minority children.

In congruence with Ready (2010), Nauer et al. (2014) found that during their research into 748 elementary and K through Grade 8 schools in New York City, 130 of the schools struggled with "persistent chronic absenteeism" (p. 2). One-third of the 130 schools had students who missed at least one month of school, equivalent to 10% of the school year. This percentage aligns with other research on chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Nauer et al. found that, of those 130 struggling schools, 33 had chronic absenteeism rates that were persistently at 40% over five years. Based on their findings, Nauer et al. decided to focus on schools with deep and persistent absenteeism within early grades. They realized that this was where serious effects

could take place both in the short and long term. Nauer et al. (2014) evaluated these "absenteeism-endemic schools" (p. 2) based upon total risk factors to identify the purely disadvantaged public schools—a concept they adopted from researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research. According to Nauer et al. (2014), an absenteeism-endemic school had a chronic absenteeism rate of more than 40% consistently over five years.

Nauer et al.'s (2014) study was designed to identify schools that served families in deep poverty, whose lives were plagued by living in temporary housing, child neglect, dysfunctional family units, etc. They calculated what they referred to as a risk load, which took into account 18 poverty-related indicators to measure families' poverty. By measuring poverty in schools using this tool, they were able to dig deeper than the broad category of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Nauer et al.'s (2014) focus on students in deep poverty (i.e., facing homelessness, maltreatment and neglect, and low mother's educational level) revealed that chronic absenteeism "strongly corresponds with where deep poverty is most virulent and entrenched in students' lives" (p. 3). They also found that these students struggled to pass the common core-aligned tests in their state. Based upon achievement testing in 2012-2013, only 10% of students passed compared to over 50% passing in schools with low instances of absenteeism. These findings also aligned with other research regarding chronically absent students and academic performance (Gottfried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014; NC Early Childhood Foundation, 2017).

Targeted Interventions and Implementation

Chronic absenteeism among elementary students has attracted much attention due to its academic effects and potential long-term implications (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014). Although chronic absenteeism is a topic of conversation among policymakers and

researchers, empirical research into this issue is sparse (Gottfried, 2014; Sugrue et al., 2016). Much of the existing literature that evaluates and identifies effective interventions or empirical connections between chronic absenteeism and interventions is limited (Sugrue et al., 2016). However, extant literature has shown that schools have seen some improvement in attendance using interventions (Gee, 2018), even though, according to Gee (2018), it is questionable whether they have the potential to reduce "systematic disparities" (p. 2) for students of diverse backgrounds. Gee further asserted that improving attendance for these children would require multipronged strategies and interventions. Other researchers have also proposed a multi-modal approach, such as using the bioecological theories systems method as a framework (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Sugrue et al., 2016). On the other hand, Sugrue et al. (2016) noted that the limitations they found in the studies they reviewed, such as ambiguous descriptions of interventions and the lack of statistical significance, rendered them challenging to replicate.

Maynard et al. (2012) conducted a Campbell Systematic Review of 28 intervention studies to assess the effects of those interventions on the attendance of chronically absent students. The Campbell Systematic Review is a method designed by the Campbell Corporation that uses evidence synthesis to evaluate the best research on specific research questions. Although the purpose of Maynard et al.'s study was to focus on students with attendance problems, it was not clear whether it focused only on students who were chronically truant. Nevertheless, their findings provide valuable context regarding the need for effective interventions to reduce absenteeism. For example, Maynard et al. found a significantly positive mean effect of interventions on improving attendance. In essence, chronically absent students benefited from interventions that targeted attendance behaviors. The average improvement in the number of days attending school across the 28 studies was 4.69 days. According to Maynard et

al. (2012), this points to the need for more effective interventions. Given the negative impact of absenteeism on elementary students, more interventions geared towards addressing this issue will prove valuable in reducing chronic absenteeism among elementary students.

Model Implementation

Robinson et al. (2018) noted that, although the association between kindergarten and elementary school attendance predicts student outcomes, there has been limited research on mitigating chronic absenteeism. Robinson et al.'s study adds to the research literature by exploring the impact of an intervention designed to combat common misconceptions that parents held on the value of elementary students attending school regularly. Their study examined the impact that a campaign targeting parents' belief system would have on improving student attendance. At the start of their research, they believed that creating a low-cost intervention geared towards tearing down false beliefs about education and replacing them with positive beliefs would improve attendance (Robinson et al., 2018).

As a result of their intervention, which entailed sending mailers to parents about their child's attendance and the value of attending school regularly, Robinson et al. (2018) reported that chronic absenteeism decreased by 15%. Many of Robinson et al.'s assumptions regarding the potential for making change based on behavioral science—particularly based on previous research suggesting that changing the way people think will change their behaviors—were confirmed. Hence, I adopted Robinson et al.'s (2018) approach and used a slightly modified version of their survey within my study to attempt to address parental perceptions regarding the value of early education and regular attendance at school.

Adapting to the Context

Robinson et al. (2018) discussed a process called Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) in their literature review. This intervention was designed to address student engagement and attendance by using a system of monitoring and accountability for students to ensure that they are showing up for school and meeting educational goal targets. Robinson et al. (2018) suggested that, based on the existing research, Check & Connect seemed to be more effective with middle and high school students and less effective with elementary students.

Counter to Robinson et al.'s (2018) perspective, Lehr et al. (2004) conducted an earlier study using the Check & Connect intervention with 147 students across several elementary schools within an urban area. They found that for students involved in the program for at least two years, absences declined from 83% to 60%. Students showed increased participation and engagement, absences dropped to or below 5% of the time, and teachers reported that both students and parents were more vested in and involved with student learning (Lehr et al., 2004).

Like Lehr et al. (2004), Cole (2011) conducted a study that included elementary students from a culturally diverse suburban elementary school in metro Atlanta. The study consisted of five kindergartners and five Grade 2 students who had accumulated seven to 14 absences. The students engaged in a six-week action research study involving the Check & Connect program. Participants received incentives from a large treasure box containing items such as pencils and toys as an incentive to encourage attendance. If students missed fewer than two days over that time, they earned a pizza lunch with the school social worker (the investigator). It is important to note that researchers support incentive programs as a means to modify student behaviors such as attendance (Peek, 2009). Before Cole's intervention, the group had an average of 8.8 absences.

At the end of the six weeks, the student absentee average was 1.7. According to Cole (2011), 77% of the students increased attendance during the study.

From my perspective, the inherent benefits of the Check & Connect approach (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.)—such as (a) assigning students to a mentor who will check in and connect with them, (b) providing individualized attention, and (c) monitoring student progress regularly—had a high probability of being proved successful in my project in a rural small school setting. I made this assertion because I had planned to build-in connections with mentors and case managers who would uncover reasons for problematic attendance and provide solutions to potential problems that may impede student success as Check & Connect stipulates (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.; U. S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2015).

Robinson et al. (2018) expressed concern that a program such as Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) would be costly. This concern could very well be valid for the small rural district. Cost considerations extend beyond personnel cost to the cost associated with a full implementation of the program's monitoring system and support at a per-pupil cost. However, research has shown that the program is customizable by the implementation team to meet the school's needs (Christenson et al., 2012; Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.). Check & Connect was also well suited for an elementary school with some supports already in place to support student success. Additionally, in-house support with Check & Connect partnerships among school personnel, family members, and community service providers helped support my planned

implementation (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.; U. S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2015).

Summary

As I have highlighted throughout this literature review, many factors contribute to students' inability to attend school regularly. Research has tied chronic absenteeism to many factors such as family structure, lack of parent involvement, and poverty. These three broad factors are not exhaustive. There is no conclusive evidence as to which factors are most associated with chronic absenteeism (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). According to Gottfried and Gee (2017), when viewed from a holistic lens, the

> empirical evidence on the determinants of chronic absenteeism [links chronic absenteeism to multiple causes as well as it relates it to] broader embedded systems involving (1) the individual child, (2) his/her surrounding contexts, both proximal (i.e., family and school) and distal (i.e., SES) and the (3) interactions that children have within and across those contexts. (p. 8).

Hence, tackling individual factors in isolation cannot effectively combat the issue. As a result, I concluded that a multi-modal approach to addressing chronic absenteeism was most beneficial (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Sugrue et al., 2016). Research using multi-modal approaches to reducing chronic absenteeism is limited. However, the existing research suggests that comprehensive and multi-faceted strategies targeting chronic absenteeism among elementary students would help address the complex and interwoven issues contributing to their attendance problems (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Sugrue et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory-based PPCT model provides such a framework for evaluating and addressing the influence of multiple factors that impact elementary students' school attendance. Tudge et al.

(2016) advised caution when using this complex framework in the light of its inherent challenges. They suggested that all four PPCT model components must be present when conducting a study guided by the bioecological theory. Tudge et al. also noted that researchers should acknowledge if all elements are not tested. This acknowledgement would ensure the theory's integrity in the context of the study. Hence, similar to Gottfried and Gee (2017), instead of relying on the model implicitly, I used it explicitly to guide my thinking about the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. My study was not intended to put Bronfenbrenner's model to the test; instead, I used it as my research framework.

In summary, I used a multi-modal intervention to address chronic absenteeism among elementary students. My intervention included three types of intervention strategies I found within the literature that have been shown to reduce absenteeism: (a) relationship-based methods using a modified version of Check & Connect (Lehr et al., 2004); (b) behavioral reinforcement through rewards for regular attendance (Cole, 2011); and (c) targeting parents' beliefs on the value of early education (Robinson et al., 2018). These three strategies have been used individually as interventions or in conjunction with another intervention. I adopted all three strategies. As Gee (2018) noted,

> schools seeking to reduce disparities in absenteeism will not only need to intentionally establish explicit targets to reduce such gaps, but they will need to develop individualized strategies to remove barriers to attendance thereby getting children—especially those facing disproportionate challenges—back into the classroom. (p. 1)

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my mixed methods, action research study was to implement and evaluate an intervention to increase the attendance rate of a select group of students with problematic attendance at TES. The intervention incorporated both child-oriented action (Check & Connect; Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) and adult-oriented action to improve parental perception of the value of attending school. My overarching research question was:

> To what extent can my intervention, implemented through an action research approach, improve problematic school attendance among a select group of elementary students within a rural Title I school?

The point has long been made that students cannot learn schoolwork if they are not present in school. The rise of virtual schools has lessened the literal cogency of that point, but the essence of the point is still valid: formal learning occurs when learners are present in whatever constitutes a formal learning environment.

The supporting sub-questions that informed the overarching research question were threefold:

> RQ1: How do the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among parents of chronically absent students contribute to the problematic attendance of students in TES?

I contended that students nurtured in a home environment that values formal education in schools in general will also value formal education in their child's school. Conversely, a dismissive attitude from parents may reinforce a student's dislike for the school environment. Of

course, the value placed on formal education is not necessarily associated with the educational level attained by a student's parents (for a prominent example, see Carson & Murphey, 1996).

RQ2: To what extent will a focused outreach revise the perceptions of parents of the educational importance of students attending school regularly?

It is by no means an easy task to change parents' perceptions regarding the value of formal education, particularly in early education school environments. This challenge is even more evident in the current educational environment in which the public school as an institution is criticized and not supported by some. For example, the former federal Secretary of Education (Betsy DeVoss) was a proponent of school choice, thereby blurring what arguably should be the Secretary's focus on the value of the public school (Strauss et al., 2018). It is understandable that parents, whose daily anxieties demand the bulk of their attention, may turn a blind eye to their child's problematic attendance at a public school.

RQ3: What are the factors implicated in problematic attendance at TES (e.g., root cause, historical trajectory) and the ecological/cultural context of that problematic attendance?

Underpinning RQ3 is my conviction that the legacy, simple solutions to problematic attendance—such as the employment of truancy officers—are both costly and ineffective in improving attendance outcomes for students (Messacar & Oreopoulous, 2013). Simple solutions fail to address the underlying causes of problematic attendance and conflate physical presence with the opportunity to learn.

Rationale for Research Design

Within my study, I adopted a mixed methods approach (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008) that facilitated my teasing out the parameters of problematic attendance at TES and assisted me in delving into the bioecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) of such problematic school

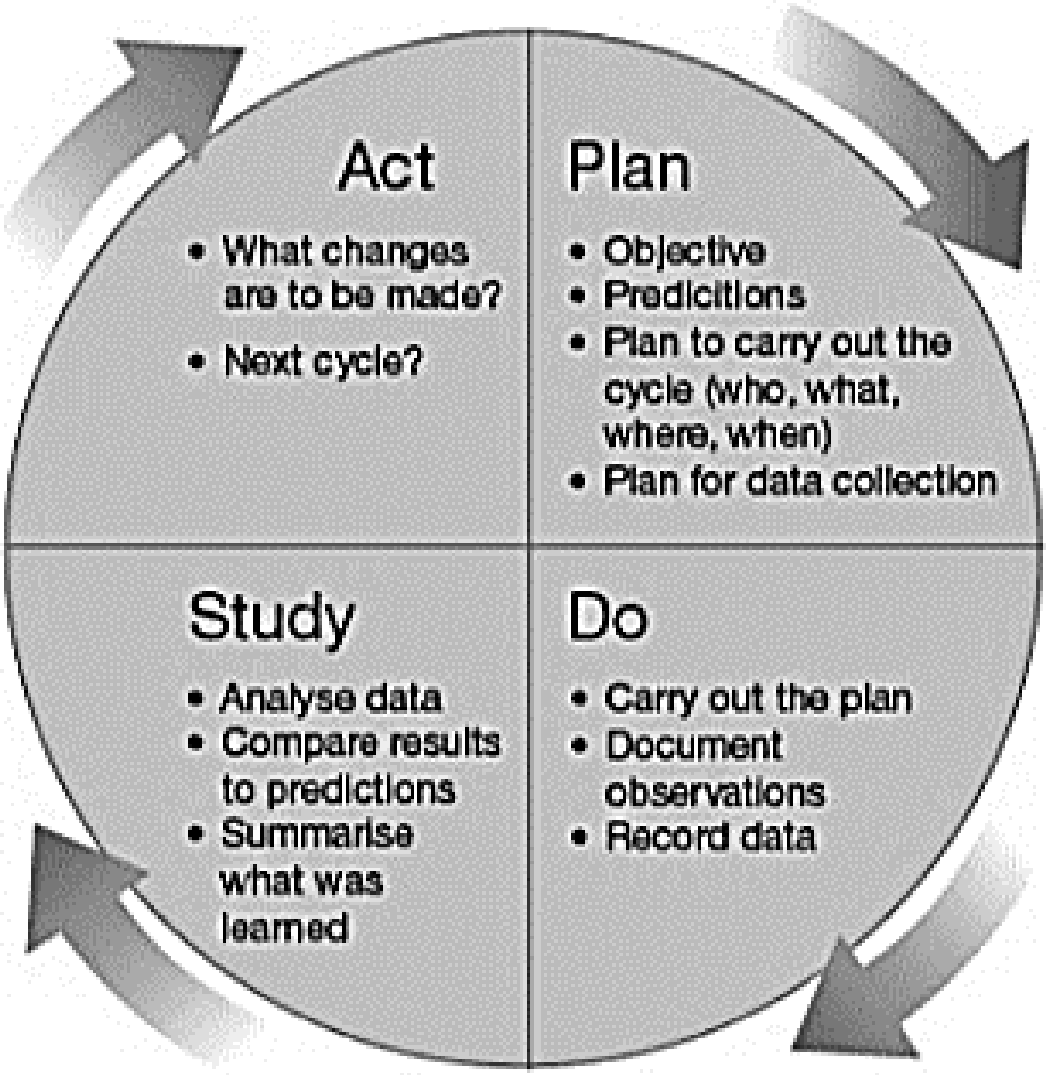
attendance. In this chapter, I discuss how I went about gathering and analyzing quantitative data relating to attendance patterns and qualitative data relating to the participants' perceptions regarding the value of education. I adopted an action research approach and used both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain an elaborated understanding of the context of the problem and the effectiveness of the intervention protocol I implemented.

Rationale for Adopting an Action Research Approach

Sagor (2000) outlined seven steps that comprise the action research process: (1) selecting a focus, (2) clarifying theories, (3) identifying research questions, (4) collecting data, (5) analyzing data, (6) reporting results, and (7) taking informed action. Action research provides a "systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (Stringer, 2014, p. 1).

Adopting an action research approach - consisting of Plan, So, Study, Act model (PDSA) as noted in Figure 3 - allowed me to focus on developing an intervention that addressed one of the problems of practice within TES. Essentially, I investigated a problem of relevance within the local context and implemented an intervention to target that problem (Sagor, 2000). As a result, action research allowed me to collaboratively inform the administrative practices of leaders and stakeholders in the community regarding the phenomenon. Additionally, action research allowed me to contribute to social change and equity by potentially empowering the students and other stakeholders (i.e., parents and staff) to overcome barriers, hence helping to mitigate problematic attendance among elementary students (Ivankova, 2014; Langley et al., 2009).

Furthermore, action research uses continuous investigative cycles such as the PDSA model to address the problem and evaluate the effectiveness of solutions to problems occurring



Note. Figure copied from Point of Care Foundation Model for Improvement from the Evidence and Resource library (https://www.pointofcarefoundation.org.uk).

Figure 3. Plan-Do-Study-Act Model.

within a local context (Ivankova, 2014; Moen & Norman, 2008; Stringer, 2014; see Figure 3). The use of investigative cycles can enhance and improve practices that increase the well-being of those involved in the process (Ivankova, 2014; Langley et al., 2009). Most complex change requires several iterations of the PDSA cycle, yet the PDSA model is not rigid and allows for the flexibility needed to address the problem at hand (Langley et al., 2009).

Mixed Methods in Action Research

According to Ivankova and Wingo (2018), the use of mixed methods within action research yields the inherent benefit of the relationship created through combining methods, thus strengthening the methodological foundation of an action research project. More specifically, using a mixed methods design allowed me to take a quantitative approach to evaluate the initial data and the effectiveness of my intervention while qualitatively exploring the participants' perceptions regarding problematic school attendance. As Plano Clark and Creswell (2008) asserted, the adoption of an explanatory sequential design facilitates the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to "measure overlapping but also different aspects of the phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon" (p. 126). Hence, within my mixed methods study of the different aspects of problematic student attendance, I sought further "elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of results" (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008, p. 127) to gain a greater understanding of the PoP confronting TES.

Research Design: An Overview

My mixed methods research design consisted of two segments: exploratory and research. During the first segment, an exploratory phase, I explored the context and root causes of the problem as well as parents' perceptions about the value of education. I conducted a parent survey

and planned a focus group during that segment to explore the bioecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that may contribute to the problem.

The second segment, the research segment, consisted of three action research cycles, in which I implemented a PDSA model in each cycle. Each cycle included an intervention that addressed problematic attendance and parents' perceptions about the importance of attending school regularly. Figure 4 is a graphic representation of the two segments of my study design.

Segment 1: Exploratory Phase

As shown in Figure 4, the exploratory phase of my study allowed me to explore the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism at TES. My first step was to review attendance data. During the fall 2020-spring 2021 school year, districts were forced to operate in a virtual and/or face to face environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I realize that this data may not provide a true reflection of problematic attendance alone. With this consideration in mind, I used Fall 2021 data to determine patterns and trends.

I then distributed a school-wide, pre-intervention survey that I adapted from Robinson et al. (2018) to obtain parents' beliefs regarding the value of education (see Appendix B). I also formed an intervention team to assist me with implementing the intervention to address my problem of practice (PoP). In the following subsections, I describe the exploratory phase in greater detail.

Initial Data Review

To begin the exploratory phase, I gathered and reviewed summary PowerSchool data from the fall 2021 school year to discern attendance patterns for TES students in Grade 1 through Grade 3. This data provided me with insights into the extent of the problem and a pool of

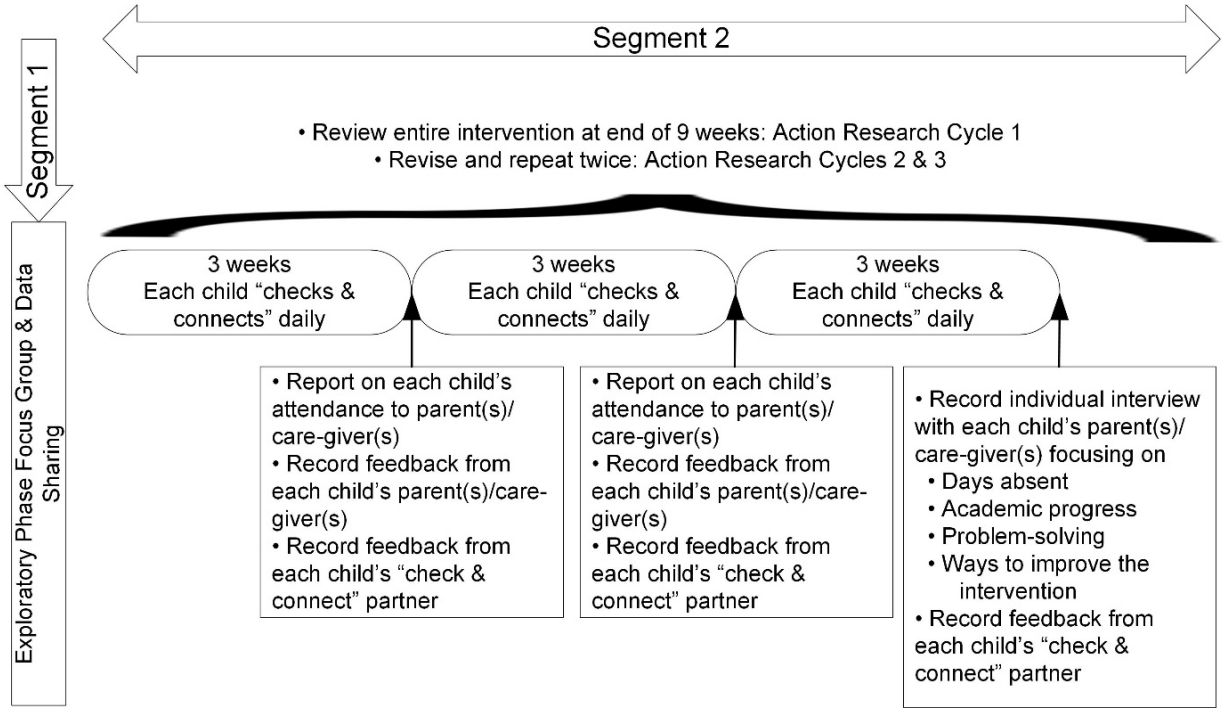


Figure 4. Graphic representation of my study design.

potential study participants. It was also designed to determine the information to be gathered from the parents during the exploratory focus group sessions.

School-Wide Survey

I conducted a 29-item school-wide survey (inclusive of five demographic questions) of parents using my adaptation of the survey created by Robinson et al. (2018) (see Appendices B & C; permission to modify received from Robinson, October 27, 2020). This survey explored parents' perceptions regarding school attendance. Survey items explored the parent's relationship with the child (Questions 1 & 2), beliefs regarding the mechanism of education (Questions 3 through 10), belief in the utility of school (Questions 11 & 15), level of trust in the local educational process (Questions 12 through 14), connection with other parents (Question 16 through 18), whether they received communications regarding their child's attendance (Questions 19, 20, 23, 24), whether they had conversations regarding their child's attendance (Questions 21 & 22), and demographics regarding the parent and student (Questions 25 through 29).

The survey was made available online using the Qualtrics application (available at https://www.qualtrics.com/) that was made available for student use through East Carolina University (see Appendix B). Paper copies were made available from the TES office for families that do not have access to the internet, and parents were invited to return completed paper copies to the TES office for my collection (see Appendix C).

Parents were notified of the survey in several of the principal's regular phone broadcasts to all phone numbers on file with the school. The principal invited parents to access the link to the Qualtrics survey from the TES website and complete the survey within a five-day window. The text of the principal's message was:

To serve and support our school families better, I invite you to respond to a survey being conducted in partnership with a study through East Carolina University to inquire into parents' thoughts and beliefs about education. Your responses will be recorded anonymously and will be analyzed by the East Carolina University researcher before summary results are shared with us. We look forward to learning about your thoughts and beliefs about education. We estimate that it will take you about 10 minutes to complete the survey. Please access the link to the survey from our school website by [deadline date]. If you are unable to respond to the survey online, please come by the school office to receive a paper copy and return it to the school office by [deadline date].

After the survey data was collected, the survey responses that were completed in Qualtrics were exported into an Excel spreadsheet. The paper copy survey responses were keyed into the spreadsheet template I exported from Qualtrics prior to data cleaning and analysis. My focus with this dataset was to produce descriptive analytics, run some comparative analysis, and identify some correlations/associations using Stata statistical software. The data was then used to report how parents' perceptions may potentially influence attendance outcomes at TES. This analysis also provided a deeper understanding to inform the implementation and analyze the outcomes of my intervention project.

Focus Group

The exploratory phase focus group session with parents was scheduled to be held online via a meeting conducted on the Zoom platform (available at https://zoom.us/). Parents could opt into the session per their acknowledgement at the end of their parent survey. Twenty-two parents opted to do so by providing their email as consent to invite them to the focus group. As a result, I sent each parent an invitation to attend the session. The invitation led them to a registration page

(available through the Zoom platform). Once they registered, the Zoom platform sent them a link and passcode to join the session. Out of the invitations, five parents of children in kindergarten through Grade 5 registered to participate.

When the parents who volunteered to participate would log in, I had planned to read through the informed consent document (see Appendix D) while screen-sharing it and asking anyone uncomfortable with continuing the session to leave.

I led the conversation by the guided set of prompts (see Appendix E) to learn parents' perceptions of the root causes of chronic absenteeism among students at TES and the value they place on early education. Based on my guiding prompts, I opened the session by sharing a brief overview of the quantitative data collected from my initial data review within this exploratory phase. This overview allowed me to further enrich the discussion. I recorded the conversation locally on my computer using the recording feature of Zoom. After the session, I uploaded the recording to my secure online storage location. I subsequently analyzed the recording to provide some insights into the potential root causes of the problem based on this parent's perception and school attendance. The file was transcribed using the Rev.com transcription service instead of an AI transcription service, due to the quality of the Zoom audio file (available at https://rev.com). I reviewed the transcriptions for themes to distill meaning from the participants' responses.

Transcribing the voice file constitutes a first pass through the focus group discussion data, during which I wrote memos to record my preliminary perspective. This perspective was based on what was shared and my observations of the dynamics of the focus group. Following the transcription, I began a first open coding pass (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) through the data, generating analytic memos to record my perspective on a particular segment of the transcript. Following this first coding pass, I reviewed the codes and the definitions I assigned to them

when I created them and made decisions regarding any redundancies. Once I refined a set of codes, I made a second pass through the data to assess the appropriateness of my coding and make decisions regarding their application to segments of the text. I reviewed both my codes and my analytic memos to create concepts and explore their properties and dimensions. Drawing on my insights into the data from this process, I drew conclusions regarding the root causes of chronic absenteeism at TES as perceived by the members of the focus group.

Intervention Team

During the exploratory phase after receiving approval from the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB), I contacted the principal to discuss the plan for the research. We discussed the staff members that would be chosen for the intervention team and established training session days for the team to discuss the study and the roles they would play. I then extended an invitation to the key school stakeholders to collaborate with me as members of an intervention team to provide feedback and assistance with my study. The intervention team consisted of the principal, a social worker, and an instructional coach. The principal facilitated and coordinated the collaborations between the intervention team members and me. This team was integral in helping to ensure that the intervention was delivered to the students during the research phase. The instructional coach served as the Check partner (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.). They served as the daily primary point of contact for the students by maintaining student attendance, encouraging, and celebrating student attendance, and providing students with rewards at the end of each week if they had perfect attendance. The school social worker served as the Connect partner, assisting with extracting attendance data and having one-on-one sessions with students every one to two weeks to discuss their attendance and provide any needed support.

Segment 2: Research Phase

As shown in Figure 4, the second segment or research phase of my study built directly on the exploratory segment and consisted of an action research approach (Langley et al., 2009; Stringer, 2014). I used three action research cycles, utilizing the Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) intervention together with a parent outreach initiative. The Check & Connect intervention is a research-driven and research-supported intervention system. It is designed to support students who have attendance issues, are disengaged, exhibit behavioral issues, or have low grades. I used this system to support the participating TES elementary students by prioritizing relationship-building and open communication with their Check & Connect partners while also providing a system of accountability and timely intervention. My design was focused on exploring what I anticipated were the causes of the problematic school attendance pattern, which is the PoP I sought to alleviate.

Participant Selection Criterion

As discussed earlier, I operationalized problematic attendance in terms of the OCR criteria (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). OCR defines problematic attendance as missing 15 or more days from school within a school year. With 185 days in a school year, this equates to students missing approximately 8% of school. As illustrated in Figure 4, in Segment 1 the intervention team and I identified students who missed eight or more days from school prior to the start of the study, which started in the middle of the 2nd quarter. At that point, the student would have already missed approximately 11% of time in school. In the School Attendance and Student Accounting Manual 2020 – 2021 (Public Schools of North Carolina

State Board of Education, 2021, p. 14), "the [principal has the] right to excuse a student temporarily from attendance on account of sickness or other unavoidable cause".

To hone our focus, we only chose students who had five or more absences listed as "unexcused" absences, giving grace to students who may have had health or other excused reasons for their absences. The team and I then chose to focus on students in Grades 1 to 3. That group of students constituted the pool of potential participants from which to invite the parents of five students across Grade 1 through Grade 3 with problematic attendance to agree that their child can participate in my intervention. Five families were invited to participate based on the students' attendance and their need for academic support to pass their current grade. Since the students themselves are considerably younger than 12 years, they were invited to provide verbal assent before being involved. In other words, I invited five families of students who have exhibited problematic attendance to participate in the study. I provided the potentially participating parent(s)/caregivers(s) with the appropriate informed consent documentation for their consideration and signature as an indication of their agreement for their child to participate in my study. Once parent(s)/caregiver(s) agreed to participate, they were invited to complete a named Parent Belief Survey to enable me to have a way of gauging any pre/post changes in beliefs.

Action Research Cycles

As shown in Figure 4, the second segment of my research consisted of implementing my action research approach using an intervention consisting of three action research cycles. The first two cycles were nine weeks in duration, while the third cycle lasted eight weeks (due to the school calendar configuration).

Action Research Cycle 1. As shown in Figure 4, Action Research Cycle 1 consisted of three 3-week long components. To initiate the cycle, each participating was to be child engaged in a Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) process with their Check & Connect partners. Simultaneously it was planned that,

1. a report on each participating child's attendance would be provided to the child's parent(s)/caregiver(s),
2. the parent(s)/caregivers would be invited to provide feedback, and
3. each child's Check & Connect partner would be invited to provide ongoing feedback.

The Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) system is designed to encourage student attendance through accountability and support and works well with other research-based interventions such as rewards. The rationale for using this system is that if students have an incentive to attend school, it will hopefully encourage parents to ensure that their child meets attendance goals and expectations. The goal of my research was to improve student attendance while addressing one factor potentially contributing to absenteeism: the perception of the parent(s)/caregiver(s) that attendance is not important. My intended planning for Action Research Cycle 1 was initially as follows below.

Plan. I planned to establish the parameters for the study and then conduct professional development with the intervention team on the intervention using the *Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention, Implementing with Fidelity* manual (Christenson et al., 2012). I oversaw collection of data, sent outreach communications to parent(s)/caregiver(s), and conferenced with parent(s)/caregiver(s) regarding their child's attendance during the study. The principal served as the liaison between me, other members of the intervention team, and teachers of the participating students to help with logistics and

ensured that there were minimal interruptions to the Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) process. The school social worker (Connect partner) pulled attendance data from PowerSchool and made several notations regarding informal conversations and attempted interventions with students to improve attendance. The instructional coach (Check partner) served as the students' points of contact for checking in daily throughout the week, providing support to students and ensuring that barriers that arose were communicated to the team to be addressed appropriately. At the end of each week, the Check partner gave the students rewards from the treasure box filled with goodies if they had perfect attendance for the week. The treasure box included pencils, small toys, candy, chips, and small gadgets that I purchased.

Do. The students who were to participate in the study checked in daily with their assigned Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) partner. I reached out to parent(s)/caregiver(s) to update them regarding their child's attendance. My outreach to parent(s)/caregiver(s) included information that highlighted the value of education, the importance of students attending school, and the impact of missing school on elementary students. In addition to written communication, I reached out to parents with a phone call. Parent(s)/caregiver(s) were invited to share feedback with me that I would record for their child. As mentioned above, feedback was obtained continuously from each child's Check & Connect partner.

Study. I analyze the data captured during Action Research Cycle 1 on an ongoing basis. Data captured included:

1. attendance data capture during each cycle,

2. check points of student classroom performance (to evaluate attendance against academic performance), and
3. feedback from parent(s)/caregiver(s) and Check & Connect partners.

2) Record interviews from the parent(s)/caregiver(s) for analysis

The analysis of data from Action Research Cycle 1 was meant to provide a first-pass perspective on my assumption that a targeted intervention will improve student attendance.

Act. I planned to meet with the intervention team to discuss what action should be taken considering my findings from Action Research Cycle 1 and then brainstorm and determine what changes needed to be made to improve the intervention, discuss my data findings, and compare them to my assumptions regarding the intervention.

Action Research Cycles 2 and 3. The purpose of the subsequent two Action Research Cycles was twofold: (a) to iterate the Action Cycle 1 and (b) to provide a longer exposure to the intervention for the participating children. The choice of the term iterate is pertinent since it invokes the incorporation of the notion of continuous improvement rather than simply a repetition. Hence, in collaboration with my intervention team members, we implemented changes or revisions as we saw fit. Action Research Cycles 2 and 3 mirrored the processes and timeline to the extent that our decisions at the end of Action Research Cycle 1 indicated as prudent.

The length of exposure to the Check & Connect process is not a trivial consideration. Regular school attendance is primarily a matter of habit formation, and a cumulative 26-week exposure is more likely to initiate habit formation than a 9-week exposure (Lally et al., 2010). Hence, the intervention team and I devised a plan to implement any necessary changes to the intervention at the "act" stage of Action Research Cycle 1 and in Action Research Cycle 2 and 3

prior to implementation in the subsequent cycles and to communicate those changes to the participating children's parent(s)/caregivers. However, the Check & Connect concept remained as unchanged as possible.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Once local approval and my IRB approval (see Appendix A) were granted, I worked with the administration of TES to obtain a list of potential participant students with problematic attendance. I reached out to the parent(s)/caregiver(s) to obtain their informed consent for both themselves and their children to participate in my study. Although students' attendance was measured in my study, my study also focused on the influence of parent(s)/caregiver(s) upon attendance as they participated in the intervention. I did not conduct interviews with students but only with parent(s)/caregiver(s) and staff at TES. Consequently, I ensured that participants were provided informed consent and that any subsequent questions they had were answered. I reassured participants of their rights at appropriate stages during the study (Mertler, 2019). I communicated their ability, at any time, to withdraw from the study if they no longer wanted to participate.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Within my mixed methods study, I adopted several approaches to data collection, including a focus group discussion, surveys, interviews, and attendance records. I collected both primary and secondary quantitative and qualitative data. According to Salkind (2010), primary data sources are original sources collected firsthand by the researcher, and secondary sources already exist, such as a database or library archives. Data were collected throughout both segments of my study. Table 1 provides a summary overview of my data collection approach.

Table 1

Research Data Collection Instrumentation

Segment	Types of instruments	Instruments	Source	Type of Data Source
Segment 1: Exploratory Phase	Focus Group	Discussion prompts	Parent participants	Primary
	Survey	Pre-intervention survey	Parent Belief Survey	Primary
	Documents/ Records Review	Attendance data	PowerSchool	Secondary
Segment 2: Research Phase	Documents/ Records Review	Attendance data	PowerSchool	Secondary
		Field notes	Self and Check & Connect partner field notes	Primary
	Interview	Phone calls	Parent Interviews	Primary
	Survey	Follow-up questionnaire	Intervention team evaluation of intervention	Primary

My implementation of the data collection instruments listed in Table 1 has been laid out in detail in the preceding sections of this chapter.

Data Processing and Analysis

The main research question that I addressed was: To what extent can a targeted intervention implemented through an action research design improve problematic school attendance among students within a rural Title I school? My three supporting sub-questions were:

RQ1: To what extent will a focused outreach revise the perceptions of parents of the educational importance of students attending school regularly?

RQ2: How do the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among parents of chronically absent students contribute to the problematic attendance of students in TES?

RQ3: What are the factors implicated in problematic attendance at TES (e.g., root cause, historical trajectory), and the ecological/cultural context of that problematic attendance?

The qualitative data were captured in my study in various ways such as feedback from a parent during a planned focus group session (which became an interview) and during one-on-one conversations with parents during which they provided insight into some potential root causes of attendance issues and their perceptions regarding the value of early education—all of which informed the context of the quantitative data (e.g., attendance patterns). I managed and organized these data and assigned themes.

The quantitative attendance data were extracted from PowerSchool and imported into Microsoft Excel to facilitate my study and provide the historical context of attendance patterns. These data were used to create a list of potential study participants that met the threshold (which

is an average of approximately 4 days a quarter) of missing 15 or more days of school and develop descriptive statistics relevant to my study. Additionally, quantitative data from the parent belief survey were exported from Qualtrics into Excel, and I keyed the responses from the paper and pencil copies (which I made available when I was faced with a disappointing return rate on the Qualtrics survey) into the same exported Excel file. After the data were keyed and cleaned, I conducted multiple analyses using JMP Pro 16 to craft data-supported answers to the many questions that arose in the process of addressing my research questions. My findings will be comprehensively explained in Chapter 4.

In general, my analyses provided me with a deeper understanding regarding the attitudes of parents at TES around the value of education and helped me to determine what variables may have noteworthy relationships with one another. Additionally, my analysis informed the research segment of this study.

The research segment consisted of implementing the intervention, which consisted of the Check & Connect intervention protocol and the parent outreach. During the research segment, I received updates on participants' attendance rates as captured in PowerSchool. The attendance data extracted from PowerSchool and analyzed using Microsoft Excel at the end of the intervention allowed me to determine whether the intervention improved student attendance through a before-and-after comparison.

Because I invited only five participants, these data were analyzed using only descriptive statistics. Finally, I surveyed the intervention team to determine whether they deemed the intervention effective for the participating students.

Role of the Researcher

At the beginning of my program, I was a district administrator serving as Director of Pre-Kindergarten. However, before beginning my research, I took on a new role as a regional impact manager with a state-led focus on increasing educational attainment across the state. Consequently, I had limited first-hand knowledge of the participants in this study. However, I am an educator who has served in districts with similar demographics. I served as an external researcher who worked in collaboration with internal agents, inclusive of the principal and staff of TES. Although much of my background has been in secondary education, I have experience as a district administrator working with elementary schools, particularly overseeing the pre-kindergarten program. Although I am not employed by the district where I conducted this study, I have built a rapport with the team at TES and worked collaboratively with them to conduct this project. Specifically, I conducted the professional development that preceded my project, and I closely monitored the project and ensured that it was carried out within the guidelines of my research design. I conducted the focus group within the first segment of my study, and I engaged with the parents during the research cycles to provide updates on their child's attendance and obtain their feedback during the process.

I began my study after obtaining approval from East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (IRB, see Appendix A). Once permission was granted, I adhered to all the stipulated requirements. I conscientiously ensured that the participants' anonymity was upheld and guarded. I informed all participants of the voluntary nature of their participation in this study. Participants were neither compensated nor penalized for participating in the study or choosing to leave the study at any time.

Due to the nature of my professional responsibilities, this study was conducted with the highest regard for the participants and their families. My goal was to share the findings of my study with district leaders and other stakeholders to inform them of the multiple barriers that impeded student attendance at TES and of an intervention designed to help improve the academic trajectory of individual students impeded by those barriers.

Summary

I designed this mixed methods action research study to determine the effectiveness of an intervention to alleviate problematic school attendance among elementary students and amend parents' perceptions of education to the extent that they may impact their students' attendance at school. This study emerged from my deep appreciation of the historical context and potential root causes that affect student attendance. I adopted an action research approach that incorporated three PDSA cycles of inquiry to impact the attendance of students in Grade 1 through Grade 3 at TES and I anticipated amending the perceptions of the importance of school attendance that may have been held by their parents/guardians. In Chapter 4, I discuss the implementation of my project and frame my findings against the backdrop of my conceptual schema.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of my mixed methods, action research study was to implement an intervention to lessen chronic student absenteeism rates in Grade 1 through Grade 3 and sharpen parents' perceptions of the value of early education at TES. This chapter contains the results of my study that was conducted to answer the following research questions. My overarching research question was:

> To what extent can my intervention, implemented through an action research approach, improve problematic school attendance among elementary students within a rural Title I school?

The three supporting sub-questions that informed the overarching research question were:

- RQ1: How do the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among parents of chronically absent students contribute to the problematic attendance of students in TES?
- RQ2: To what extent will a focused outreach revise the perceptions of parents of the educational importance of students attending school regularly?
- RQ3: What are the factors implicated in problematic attendance at TES (e.g., root cause, historical trajectory), and the ecological/cultural context of that problematic attendance?

This chapter also includes a discussion of how I conducted the analysis consistent with mixed methods action research approach and how my analysis of the data ties back to the research questions. I describe the process of analyzing the attendance data, survey data, and transcripts from the participants.

Study Environment

Prior to obtaining IRB approval, I received approval from the PSD superintendent to perform my study in one of the elementary schools. The principal of the school on which I initially focused was very excited about the possibility of implementing an intervention within their school. It was an ideal site since they had already begun addressing student absences during the 2019-2020 school year prior to the pandemic. The social worker gave concentrated attention to those chronic absentee cases by contacting families and checking-in to see why students were not coming to school. The principal provided me with a letter of permission to use their school site. However, as I was preparing to apply for IRB approval, I ran into some unforeseen barriers that would have made it challenging to implement the study successfully at that school. The school experienced significant teacher and staff shortages that would have impacted the study implementation. After careful consideration and dialog with the principal and my dissertation Chair, I decided not to attempt to implement the study on that campus. Fortunately, I was able to pivot and secured the agreement of the leadership of the school at which I completed my study. This school (TES) has similar demographics and attendance issues to the first school.

What I found most interesting at the outset about TES was that the school leaders did not realize that student attendance was problematic until we began to examine their data. What we found was astounding: Although it was only the middle of the second quarter, 13% of the students within Grades K-5 had missed 8 or more days of school. Fully 32.6% of the students had already missed 5 or more days from school. In context, these absences included both excused and unexcused absences. However, as the intervention team reviewed the data, the principal noted that "an absence is an absence—the student has still missed time away from instruction" (principal, personal statement, November 17, 2021).

After reviewing the list, the intervention team selected students in Grades 1-3 to invite to participate in the study. Initially, we selected six students hoping that five of the families would agree to participate. We discussed multiple characteristics such as the academic needs of the student, excused vs unexcused absences, the potential benefit of the Check & Connect intervention for the student's academic and social-emotional wellbeing, and the family support/dynamics. Each of the students chosen to receive an invitation was in danger of being retained if nothing happened to improve their current trajectory. There were on track to being considered chronically absent or had already reached the threshold I set for this study of 15 days or more missed, as defined by the OCR (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

Study Procedures: Data Collection and Intervention

I began collecting data for fall 2021 during the middle of the second quarter. Segment 1, the Exploratory Phase (see Figure 4), consisted of reviewing summary attendance data from students from the first quarter until the middle of the second quarter for the 2021-2022 school year (see Figure 5—marker at 11/15/2021). Additionally, I collected and analyzed responses from a school-wide, pre-intervention parent belief survey and I planned to conduct a parent focus group (see Figure 5—bracket at 11/17 – 11/23). I used the results of my analysis of those Segment 1 data were used to inform the targeted intervention for both parents and the students that occurred within Segment 2 (again, see Figure 4). Qualitative data that I captured during the Segment 2 consisted of (a) summaries of student attendance patterns from the intervention team (the principal, the social worker, and the instructional coach), (b) feedback from parents during check-ins, and (c) survey data from the intervention team regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. I also gathered quantitative data on student attendance. I encountered some issues

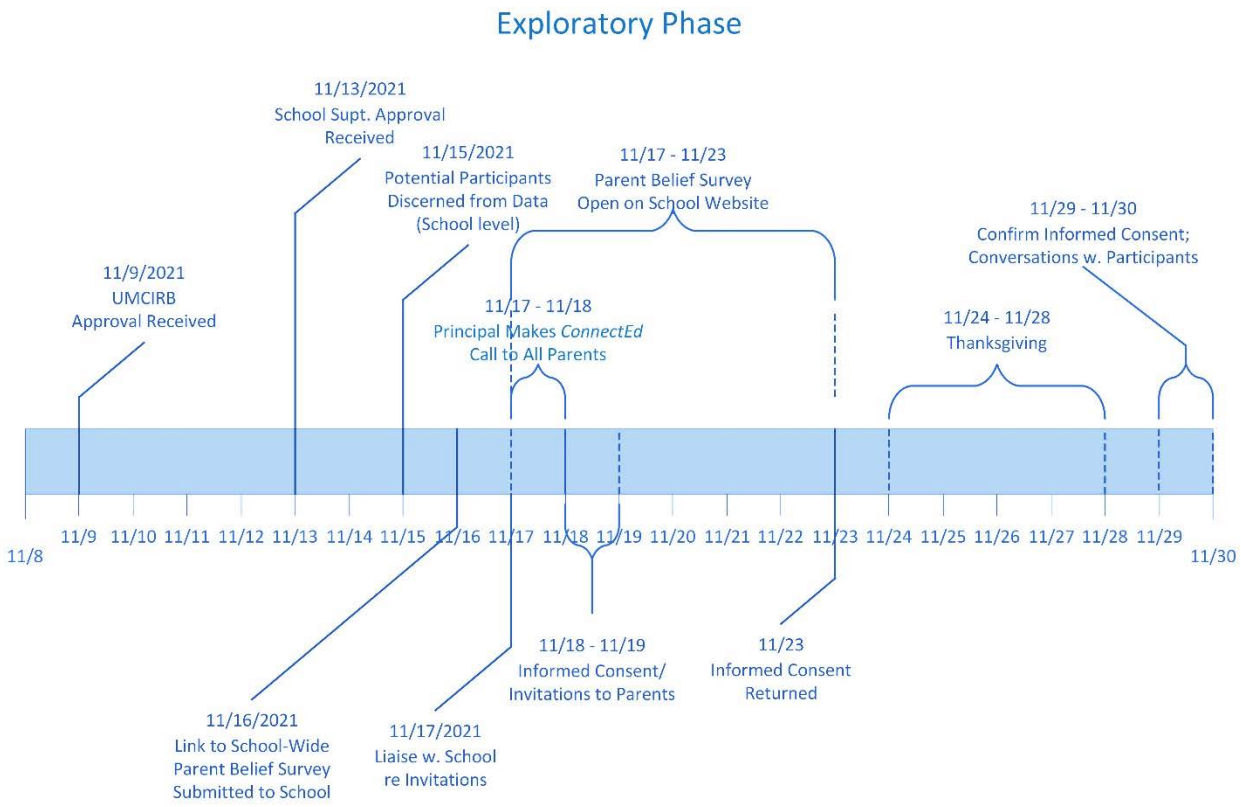


Figure 5. Timeline of Segment 1: Exploratory Phase.

during the data collection process within both the Segment 1 and Segment 2. These issues were mostly associated with the challenges that schools and families faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other issues were due to poor learning infrastructure arguably associated with families' poverty and their living in a rural North Carolina County such as limited broadband access.

Data Collection Issues: Segment 1 Exploratory Phase

Issues that arose during the Segment 1: Exploratory Phase may have been related to parents' lack of access to technology and/or broadband. The principal requested their school media specialist to place the parent survey online on the school's website. They also placed a message on the TES Facebook page encouraging parents to visit the website to complete the survey. I hoped that this survey would be completed by at least 50% of the parents of currently enrolled students (144 families). The principal also sent out several recorded phone messages that encouraged parents to complete the survey online. However, there was a low response rate. I extended the window for the survey a few more days while rallying parents' participation through additional calls from the principal. I continued to face a low rate of survey completion; only five parents totally completed the online survey.

Although the intervention team and I anticipated the possibility of parents' inability to access the online survey, we did not think it would impact as many parents. Given the reality, I requested the principal's support in sending paper surveys home with students to hopefully get a better response. Parent responsiveness improved considerably as 82 additional surveys were returned. Hence, the overall number of surveys completed was 87 yielding an acceptable participation rate of 60.4%.

Another issue that I encountered during the Exploratory Phase was level of participation during the parent focus groups. I scheduled two virtual focus group sessions. I chose to conduct virtual focus groups due to the surge in COVID-19 cases during this time. I sent an invitation to the 10 parents that opted in to participate in their choice of one of two sessions. Five parents registered to attend, however only one parent showed up. I opted to conduct a semi-structured interview with that parent based on my prepared focus group prompts to garner their insights regarding the root causes of chronic absenteeism at TES. The parent provided some context regarding what they perceived to be the reasons students did not attend school.

Data Collection Issues: Segment 2 Research Phase

Conducting my research during COVID-19 presented me with a set of challenges that I dealt with as best I could. During Segment 2 (see Figure 4), I had planned to have regular check-ins with parents of the five participating students on a regular basis (every 3 weeks). Unfortunately, I was unable to implement my plan. For further context, there were only four biological parents participating in the study, as one of the parents, a relative of another one of the students in the study, became that student's guardian and as the parent opted not to be contacted.

I was able to communicate with only three of the four participating parents once during each 3-week sub-phase of Segment 2 of my study (again, see Figure 4). During the first 3-week sub-phase of Segment 2, COVID-19 had surged within local communities. Students were absent due to being quarantined. It became exceedingly difficult for me to connect with one of the four parents; they were virtually unreachable. With the other three parents, I was mindful of illnesses, family issues, and quarantines. Hence, I provided them with the space to handle and manage the issues with which they were dealing at that time. The school leadership team continued to

follow-up with families to address attendance issues and assess whether additional steps needed to be taken.

In summary, throughout the study, I was only able to consistently connect with three of the four parents. The parent that I was never able to speak with would agree to our successively scheduled meeting times, but they would never be available to answer my calls. Consequently, although I have qualitative data from parents related to the study, there is one parent's voice that will not be heard. I am appreciative of the insights I received from the intervention team members regarding this complex situation.

Intervention Procedures

My planned intervention during Segment 2 (see Figure 4) consisted of a two-pronged approach. The first prong entailed implementing the Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018) model to provide the five students with a means of attendance accountability as well as the opportunity to relate to their Connect partner (school social worker) to ensure that there were not any environmental barriers that would impede the student from attending school regularly. The second prong entailed checking-in with parents to discuss their child's attendance as well as to provide them with information on the value of children attending school.

The students were invited to participate based upon their being either chronically absent or on track to being chronically absent. The criteria were set based on guidelines of a student being considered chronically absent having missed 15 days or more of a school year (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Using that guidance, I estimated that missing roughly 4 days per quarter could put the student in danger of being chronically absent. At the point of selection, the school year was halfway into the second quarter. Hence, the intervention team considered students who had missed 7 or more days at that point as potential

participants. There were 26 students that met that threshold. The intervention team then selected students who were at greatest risk of failure academically and who would more than likely respond positively to the invitation.

During the Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018) part of the intervention, the five students participating in my study checked in daily with the Check partner (the instructional coach; see Intervention Team in Chapter 3 for details) and once every 1 to 2 weeks with their Connect partner (the social worker). Because TES is a small school (144 students), it was very easy for the Check partner (the instructional coach) to ensure that they checked with the students daily. There were no barriers that impeded this process other than a student's simply not showing up for school. I collected data on participating students' attendance as well as field notes captured by the Check & Connect partners.

Due to the demands of the Check & Connect partners' roles within the school, the preparation for end-of-year testing and grading, and even illness among the intervention team (the principal, the social worker, and the instructional coach), there were two instances where field notes/feedback from the team members about students' responsiveness to the intervention and attendance patterns were minimal or non-existent. During the last cycle, I had to request feedback from the Check & Connect partner twice after my initial request. This happened on two occasions. It was during those times I reached out to the principal to assist me with obtaining feedback on how the intervention was going. The principal was very responsive and supportive. She was gracious in reminding them of the procedures of the intervention as well as compensating for some issues with illness that affected my ability to receive feedback from them.

The parent outreach aspect of the intervention using the attendance flyers went out to parents three times during the intervention. The first flyer went out at the beginning of the second cycle, the second flyer went out at the end of the second cycle and the third flyer went out in the middle of the third cycle. Each flyer contained the number of cumulative days missed by the child, and the number of days missed during the study. Calls to parents/guardians followed the flyer. The flyer was intended to prompt conversations with parents to (a) increase parents' awareness of the value of sending their child to school and the impact that absenteeism has on a students' academic success, (b) provide awareness of number of days missed, and (c) create an opportunity for conversations about how to promote regular attendance.

Data Analysis and Results

I designed this study to answer the overarching question of to what extent can my intervention implemented through an action research design improve problematic school attendance among students within a rural Title I school. I established three supporting sub-questions to inform the overarching question. I designed these questions to address the problem using a multi-pronged approach which included two segments: Segment 1 (an Exploratory Phase) and Segment 2 (the Research Phase consisting of three, 3-week intervention cycles, see Figure 4). The analysis of the data from Segment 1 informed Segment 2 of the study.

Segment 1: Exploratory Phase

During the Exploratory Phase, I used the following research data collection instrumentation (see Table 1): a focus group (which became a structured interview when only one parent followed through and kept their appointment), a parent belief survey, and a review of student attendance records.

Focus Group Transition to Semi-Structured Interview

As shown in Appendix E, my plan was to open the focus group by sharing my preliminary analysis of attendance data for Grades 1 through 3 at TES before seeking the participants' perspectives on six questions. For the one parent that attended, I was able to conduct a one-on-one semi-structured interview

To recap, my study was designed to incorporate a focus group session following the school-wide parent survey to further explore the context of problematic attendance. My initial plan was to hold a face-to-face focus group session of approximately 10 parents at the school. To facilitate this, at the conclusion of the survey, parents had the opportunity to elect whether they wanted to participate in the focus group.

I was pleased when I saw that 22 parents had volunteered to participate. Given that there were too many acceptances for a single focus group, I decided to break the session up into two focus groups. However, before I had a chance to schedule the focus groups, COVID-19 intervened, and I had to abandon my plan for face-to-face focus groups. After consulting with my dissertation chair, I decided to attempt to conduct two Zoom-based online focus group sessions. The substance of the email to the members of each group was as follows:

> I want to thank you for volunteering to be a part of a focus group to allow me to further understand parents' insights on student attendance. As I stated in the informed consent document that you read and acknowledged when you took the survey, this focus group session is voluntary. Because of COVID-19, I will be conducting the focus group online using Zoom.
>
> I have created a Zoom session for the following time, [Dec 20, 2021 06:00 PM for Group 1; Dec 20, 2021 07:30 PM for Group 2], and I sincerely hope that you can participate. If

you have not used Zoom before, you will need to log in at least 10 minutes early so that you can register and make sure you download the software for the session. Please email me if you have any questions or problems logging on!

I attached the informed consent document (see Appendix A) to the email to remind potential participants of what to expect in the session. I looked forward to hosting a spirited discussion among the participants of both groups and I sent a reminder email earlier in the day to remind all members of both groups. Prior to the sessions, I received five parent registrations. On the evening of the session, I opened both sessions in Zoom at the scheduled times. Unfortunately, no parents from Group 1 logged on. Of the two parents from Group 2 that registered to participate at the 7:30 p.m. time, unfortunately, only one of those parents logged on.

After giving the Group 2 participants a few additional minutes to join, I decided to proceed with a discussion with the one parent that was in attendance as a semi-structured interview. I utilized the Focus Group Prompts (see Appendix E) to conduct the interview, so the base-level interview questions were pre-established. The interview session consisted of the following parts: (a) I started the interview by introducing myself, (b) I covered the purpose, session logistics, and revisited informed consent, (c) I presented the interview questions, and (d) I closed the interview by thanking the participant. I had asked the participant's permission for me to record the Zoom session for the purpose of accuracy and to enable me to transcribe it. I also noted that I would be jotting notes as we talked. I also explained to the participant that I was still analyzing the school-wide survey due to the fact had to resort to offering a paper-based option in addition to the online version. I shared with the participant that their responses to the questions would help to provide further context to the survey data.

Overview of Interview Data

The first question I asked in the focus group transitioned to an interview was "What is your perspective on the importance of elementary students attending school every day?" The parent's response was that they were not sure about the importance of elementary students attending school every day. They noted, however, that it was important that children attend school daily in general to get their education, and to avoid falling behind. During the pandemic, their child was not able to be in school every day face-to-face and had "started falling behind." They felt that children "should be in school to get all the education they can get."

Moving on to the focus of Question 2 ("To what degree is it more important for middle school or high school students to attend every day than elementary students?"), I asked the parent whether it was more important for elementary students to attend school daily than it was for middle school students to attend school daily and they stated that they did not believe that was the case. They were explicit in their assertion that, although the workload and rigor were different between the two levels, "they still got to learn regardless." When I asked the parent in what ways they thought that missing school impacted elementary students, they responded "it affects them bad, real, real bad." They then went on to say that when children miss one or two days from school that loss of instruction affects their ability to remain on track. They noted that taking breaks for both students and teachers is understandable, but that when students miss instruction it not only affects their grades it also accrues time that needs to be made up, even if that requires children to attend summer school. I invited them to tell me more about the value they placed on additional instruction supports such as after-school tutoring and summer school. They referred again to how their child fell behind in both math and reading during the pandemic. They asserted that students who have fallen behind should have additional opportunities to get

assistance outside of the regular instructional time—such as through afterschool programs—and they suggested that perhaps such children should have the opportunity to attend an additional class.

Judging that the focus of Question 3 had been adequately addressed, I moved on to Question 4 ("What do you think are the major reasons that kids miss school?"). I wanted to delve into what this participant saw as the root causes of student absenteeism. I wanted to garner their insights into the major reasons students miss school. They responded that "either doctor's appointment, a lot of health issues that are going on, or family loss are the main ones." In retrospect, I wonder how much of their response reflected the tremendous challenges that families faced because of the pandemic. I also wonder whether that answer would be different at a different point in time. I further queried them around the causes of elementary students missing days from school by asking if they felt that the issue was simply children not wanting to go to school or if they felt that there could be a legitimate issue involved. They responded that no parent should allow their children to miss school unless something was truly going on.

Moving on to Question 5 ("In what ways do you believe that this school provides the children who attend it with the best education possible?"), I was privileged to unearth how this parent valued the education their child was receiving at the child's current school, and whether they felt it was the best education the child could get. They responded that children receive a better education at school than at home. Again, their response potentially reflected the remote learning experience that students dealt with as a result of the pandemic. They then went on to say that at home children struggle against the distractions of technology. Although children use similar technology at school, children perceive that technology at home is more for entertainment

than for learning. They then reiterated that children "get more education in school than out of school".

This took me to Question 6 ("How would you rate your satisfaction with the school's ability to meet the needs of the children who attend it [Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Not Sure, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied]?" I asked the question and presented them with the Likert-scale options. They responded both "Satisfied" and "Dissatisfied." When I asked them to explain, they mentioned that their child was easily distracted and prone to falling behind. They noted that their child required "a bit of attention." They noted their satisfaction with the fact that the child's teacher tried to help and provided the needed attention. Their dissatisfaction related to the large class sizes that it made it impossible for students to truly learn. I concluded by thanking the parent for their feedback and for taking the time to speak with me.

The interview data I captured from this parent prefigured the views with the majority of responses to Q5, Q8, and Q9 on the Parent Belief Survey (to be discussed below). Those three questions addressed parents' attitudes regarding the importance of attending school and how missing days had a negative impact on student outcomes. Although 28% of the parents were ambivalent regarding the quality of standards that students are learning (as noted in Q10 of the survey), this parent agreed with 72% of the parents that responded that their child was receiving a quality education.

Overall, although this parent did express some dissatisfaction with the school due to the overcrowding of the classrooms, they found value in their child's attending school and doing so regularly. Although some of the root causes that I anticipated would have surfaced in the context of a Title I school were not addressed in our interview, the parent provided helpful insights into their understanding of the importance of regular school attendance.

School-Wide Parent Belief Survey

As shown in Appendix B and discussed above, I created an online version of the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018) using Qualtrics. When only five parents completed it, the principal of TES kindly agreed to distributing a paper copy (see Appendix C). The Parent Belief Survey was intended to provide insight into the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among the parents of TES students in general (see RQ1).

The five parent responses were captured in Qualtrics and then exported into Excel. After the paper copies of the survey were widely distributed, a further 75 parent/guardian responses were received, and I keyed those responses into the same Excel file. After I checked the data to eliminate errors, it was then imported into JMP Pro 16 for analysis. My focus with this dataset was to produce descriptive analytics, comparative analysis, and to identify some potential correlations/associations.

Survey Respondent Demographics. I administered the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018; see Appendix B and Appendix C) as a school-wide survey to provide the backdrop against which my intervention could take place. The demographic questions in the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018; see Appendix B and Appendix C) are included at the end of the survey, but those data are discussed here to impose a more logical order on the elaboration of the data. Of the 92 caregivers who engaged at all with the survey, 12 were deleted from consideration. These respondents either logged-in to the online survey while entering either minimal or no responses or they returned the hard copy survey but did not provide either any responses or very few responses. This left 80 participants whose students' demographics are shown in Figure 6.

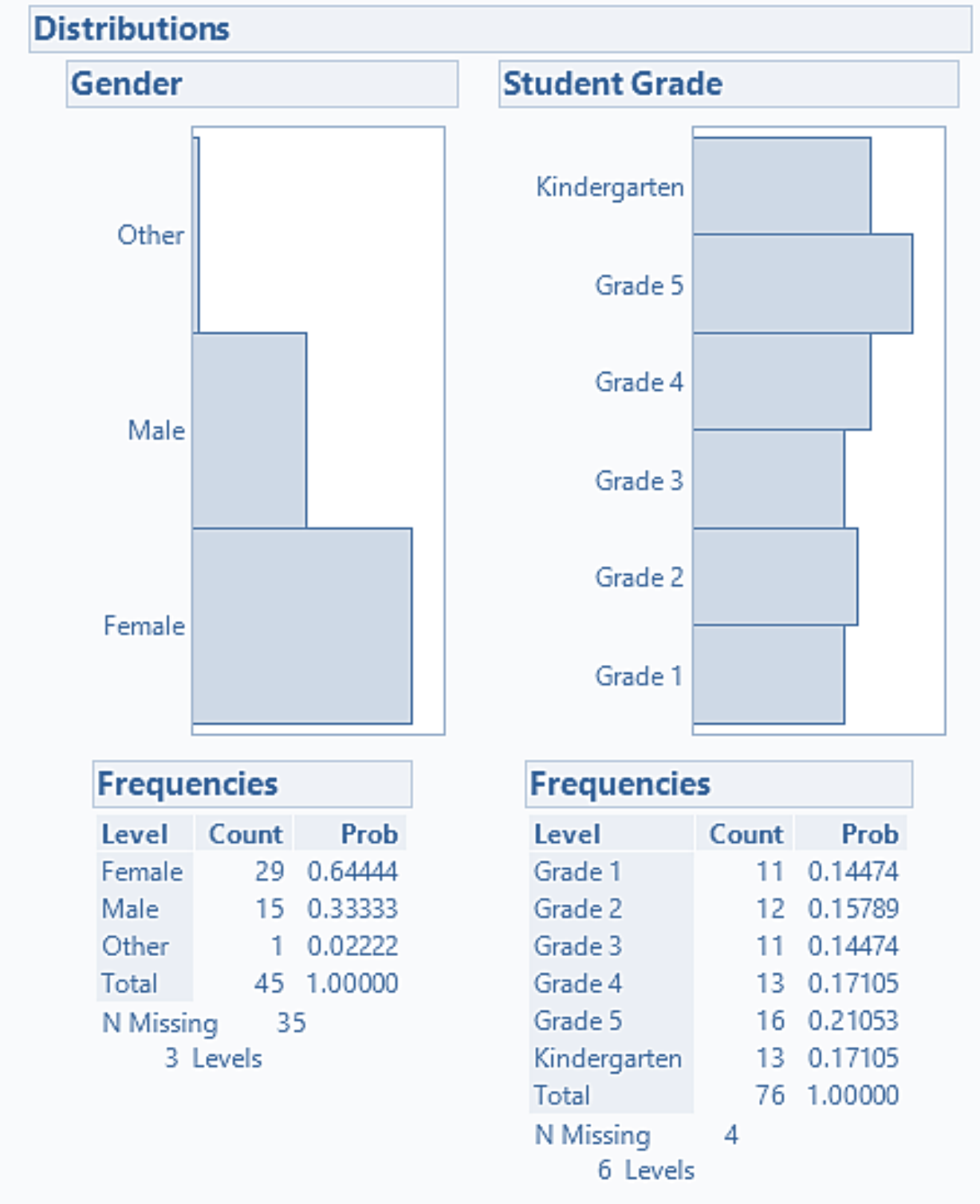


Figure 6. Demographic of students whose caregivers engaged meaningfully with the survey.

As shown in Table 2, in response to Questions 28 and 29, the majority of respondents identified themselves as "Black or African American" (n = 54; 68%) with "White" and those who did not identify their ethnicity ("Null") while still providing information about their highest level of school both constituted just over 11% (n = 9) of respondents. Exactly 50% (n = 27) of the Black or African American respondents claimed high school graduation as their highest level of education and a further 27.5% (n = 22) claimed having engaged in higher education although only 2.5% (n= 2) had attained a 4-year degree. None of the nine White participants had attained a 4-year degree although 33.3% (n = 3) of them had some level of engagement in higher education. Interestingly, the same number of Black or African American and White respondents had failed to complete high school (n = 3) but they represented very different percentages of the respondents in each category (5.5% vs. 33.3%).

Synthesizing the responses to Questions 26, 27, and 28, Table 3 illustrates that the majority of respondents who identified as Black or African American also identified themselves as parents (instead of extended family caregivers) of a Black or African American student (n = 45, 83.3%). The observation was true also for the White respondents (n = 7, 77.7%). Overall, there were seven respondents who were grandparents (8.8%) and only two who were either aunts or uncles (2.5%). There were only four instances (5%) in which respondents identified the ethnicity of the student as in any way different from their own.

Warmth of Parent-Child Relationship and School Attendance. The Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018; see Appendix B and Appendix C) consists of 24 survey questions that preceded the five demographic questions already considered. Question1 and Question 2, when considered together, provide insight into how the respondents viewed their disciplinary

Table 2

Demographics of Adult Respondents

Q28-What is your ethnicity?	Q29-What is the highest level of school you have completed?	*n*	*N*
Black or African American	None, or Grades 1-8	1	54
	High School incomplete (Grades 9-11)	3	
	High School Graduate (Grade 12 or GED Certificate)	27	
	Technical, Trade, or Vocational School AFTER high school	2	
	Some College, Associate Degree, no 4-year degree	15	
	College Graduate (BS, BA, or other 4-year degree)	3	
	Some Post-Graduate or Professional School, no degree (e.g., some graduate school)	2	
	Missing	1	
White	High School incomplete (Grades 9-11)	3	9
	High School Graduate (Grade 12 or GED Certificate)	3	
	Technical, Trade, or Vocational School AFTER high school	1	
	Some College, Associate Degree, no 4-year degree	2	
American Indian or Alaska Native/White	High School incomplete (Grades 9-11)	2	3
	Some College, Associate Degree, no 4-year degree	1	
Other/Multiple	Some College, Associate Degree, no 4-year degree	2	2
Prefer Not to Say	High School Graduate (Grade 12 or GED Certificate)	1	2
	College Graduate (BS, BA, or other 4-year degree)	1	
Black or African American/Prefer Not to Say	High School incomplete (Grades 9-11)	1	1
Null	High School Graduate (Grade 12 or GED Certificate)	2	9
	Missing	7	

Table 3

Demographics of Students on Whom Respondents Focused

Q28-What is your ethnicity?	Q26-What is the ethnicity of the child on whom you focused in this survey?	Q27-What is your relationship to the child on whom you focused in this survey?	*n*	*N*
Black or African American	Black or African American	Parent	45	54
		Grandparent	4	
		Aunt or uncle	2	
	Other/Multiple	Parent	1	
	Black or African American/Hispanic or Latino	Parent	1	
	Null	Grandparent	1	
White	White	Parent	7	9
		Grandparent	2	
American Indian or Alaska Native/White	Other/Multiple	Parent	1	3
	American Indian or Alaska Native/Black or African American/White	Parent	1	
	American Indian or Alaska Native/White	Parent	1	
Other/Multiple	Other/Multiple	Parent	2	2
Prefer Not to Say	Prefer Not to Say	Parent	2	2
Black or African American/Prefer Not to Say	Black or African American/Prefer Not to Say	Parent	1	1
Null	Null	Parent	1	9
		Missing	8	

role regarding school attendance in the context of their overall relationship with their children. As shown in Table 4, the 76 students for whom respondents provided grade-level data were spread evenly across the six grade levels (K – Grade 5). To reiterate, I received a grand total of 92 responses to the survey, but the partial responses from 12 respondents showed that they did not engage meaningfully with it and were deleted. Of the remaining 80 cases, some participants did not provide answers to some questions. Such non-responses were excluded from analyses on a per-question basis.

Respondents were unanimous in their assertion that they had a warm and loving relationship with their children (columns 2 & 3), but that did not preclude disagreements with their children about whether they should go to school (columns 4 & 5). Unfortunately, column 4 is difficult to interpret intuitively because of the negative phrasing of the prompt ("my child and I disagree") and the phrasing of the response ("agree" or "disagree"). In this case, the double negative indicated that respondents and children were of the same mind about whether they should go to school. While I refrain from placing too much emphasis on this survey finding because of the problematic phrasing, it appears the respondents did not confuse having a warm and loving relationship with their children with seeing-eye-to-eye about attending school.

School Attendance and Education Outcomes: Questions 1 through 14. The survey questions numbered 1 through 14 provided a sense of how respondents perceived the question of school attendance in general. Table 5 shows the responses of all 80 respondents across all the response options for those 14 questions.

As responses to Question 1 show, all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they had a warm and loving relationship with their child. This exposes a crucial characteristic of

Table 4

Warmth of Parent-Child Relationship and Shared Attendance Attitudes

Student Grade	Q1. My child and I have a warm and loving relationship.	*n*	Q2. On some days, my child and I disagree about whether they should go to school.	*n*
Kindergarten	Agree	2	Disagree	1
n=13	Strongly Agree	11	Agree	1
			Strongly Disagree	4
			Disagree	5
			Agree	1
			Strongly Agree	1
Grade 1	Strongly Agree	11	Strongly Disagree	4
n=11			Disagree	4
			Agree	2
			Strongly Agree	1
Grade 2	Strongly Agree	12	Strongly Disagree	4
n=12			Disagree	6
			Agree	2
Grade 3	Strongly Agree	11	Strongly Disagree	3
n=11			Disagree	6
			Agree	1
			Strongly Agree	1
Grade 4	Agree	1	Disagree	1
n=13	Strongly Agree	12	Strongly Disagree	5
			Disagree	3
			Agree	4
Grade 5	Agree	1	Agree	1
n=16	Strongly Agree	15	Strongly Disagree	4
			Disagree	7
			Agree	2
			Strongly Agree	2
Missing *n=4*				
Total *N=80*				

Table 5

School Attendance and Education Outcomes

Parent Belief Survey Question (Robinson et al., 2018)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Prefer Not to Say	Don't Know	Null
Q1. My child and I have a warm and loving relationship.	76	4	0	0	0	0	0
Q2. On some days, my child and I disagree about whether they should go to school.	5	14	35	26	0	0	0
Q3. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's reading ability.	25	18	22	13	0	1	1
Q4. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's math ability.	25	21	20	12	0	1	1
Q5. Missing a few days of school each month in my child's grade is not a big deal.	3	9	26	40	1	1	0
Q6. Missing a few days of school each month in Grades K–3 can lead to poor attendance in middle school and high school.	15	25	19	14	0	4	3
Q7. It is okay for my child to be absent for a few days each month, as long as they are excused absences.	8	22	23	24	1	1	1
Q8. In order to be on track for their next grade, it is important for my child to be in school every single day.	52	21	2	0	1	0	4

Table 5 (continued)

Parent Belief Survey Question (Robinson et al., 2018)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Prefer Not to Say	Don't Know	Null
Q9. What my child learns in their current grade is critical for them to succeed in high school.	41	22	3	4	1	5	4
Q10. What my child is taught this year is based on rigorous standards set by the state of North Carolina.	28	30	2	0	3	10	7
Q11. Absences during elementary school will not affect whether my child graduates from high school.	8	19	27	13	2	6	5
Q12. I trust that the decisions made by the people at the district office are in the best interests of my child.	24	30	4	3	2	10	7
Q13. The people within my child's school are professionals who are experts in education.	20	38	4	2	3	7	6
Q14. The people at the district office are professionals who are experts in education.	16	40	4	1	1	12	6

the sample of school parents whose views are reflected in this survey—the views of those who have problematic relationships with their children are not represented. This is clearly pertinent to my school attendance project. I have discussed the issue with Question 2 already, but suffice it to say, there was much stronger disagreement/strong disagreement (n = 61) than strong agreement/agreement (n = 19). These two questions evoked settled opinions with no respondent choosing either "prefer not to say" or "don't know," or failing to respond ("null").

Responses to Questions 3 and 4 indicated considerable lack of consensus regarding the importance of consistent daily attendance with respect to their child's ability in both reading and math. While this is not the focus of my study, I imagine that the close-to-uniform spread across the strongly-agree/strongly-disagree continuum should spur interest from among the administrators and teachers. Responses to Questions 5 and 8 indicated that respondents share my belief and support the stipulations enshrined in federal policy regarding the critical importance of consistent attendance, while Questions 6 and 7 indicated respondents' considerable ambivalence regarding the downstream effects of poor attendance in Grades K - 3. However, respondents apparently believed in the downstream effects of academic learning in their current grades (Question 9)—which is at odds with the ambivalence they showed regarding Questions 3 and 4. Responses to Question 10 indicated a lack of knowledge among respondents regarding the rigor of the academic standards stipulated by NC DPI and might warrant some consideration among TES school leaders and district administrators about ways to address this issue.

Question 11 focused on the question that is central to the emphasis on consistent attendance at school from the earliest grades—what is the downstream impact of poor attendance in elementary school? Almost 60% (40/67) of the respondents who expressed an opinion

indicated their disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that absences in elementary school impact graduation from high school.

The prompts for Questions 12 through 14 invited respondents to reflect on their level of trust in decision-makers at the school and district level. Responses indicated a solid base of support for local educational leaders although an average of nine respondents across these three questions responded that they were not in a position to know. Again, this outcome should spur some reflection among TES school leaders and district administrators about ways to address this issue.

Survey Data by Demographic Classification: Questions 3 through 14. As mentioned already, there are missing data (coded throughout as "999") in many participants' responses, requiring me to decide whether to include data from responses with missing data in the analyses. I decided to exclude responses on a question-by-question basis (e.g., in examining differences related to student grade, I excluded participants' responses that did not indicate the student's grade from consideration as well as the responses that did not provide an answer to the specific question).

There are four logical demographic classifications across which to analyze the survey responses to these questions: (a) student grade (Kindergarten through Grade 5; aggregated after an initial analysis into Kindergarten through Grade 2/Grade 3 through 5), (b) student gender (male/female/other), (c) caregiver education level (which I decided to aggregate into two categories: high school & below/some college), and (d) caregiver role (which I decided to aggregate into two categories: parent/extended family).

Questions 3 through 14 constituted a logical grouping of questions offering the same scale of responses ("strongly agree" through "strongly disagree"). Contingency tables of

participants' responses to Questions 3 through 14 revealed no significant difference across student grade (*n* = 13 Kindergarten, 11 Grade 1, 12 Grade 2, 11 Grade 3, 13 Grade 4, 16 Grade 5). I chose Fisher's exact test as the indicator of significant difference because 20% of the cells had expected counts less than 5, making Chi-square values suspect. (Despite the large number of participants who responded to the survey, the same low expected count emerged across all the subsequent contingency table analyses.)

I then decided to aggregate the student grade data into just two categories (Kindergarten through Grade 2/Grade 3 through Grade 5) to investigate whether there were any differences across Questions 3 through 14 on this less fine-grained basis and again found no significant differences. Similarly, there was no significant difference among participants' responses across either student gender (*n* = 29 female, 15 male, 1 other) or parent educational level (*n* = 43 high school & below, 29 some college; there were too few extended family respondents to warrant an analysis for this subcategory).

Only one significant difference emerged in relation to only Question 3 in analyzing responses across Questions 3 through 14 with respect to the caregiver role (*n* = 9 extended family, 62 parent; Fisher's exact test = .0130 [two-tailed]). However, consideration of the contingency table for this analysis (see Table 6) suggests how unwise it would be to place too much weight on this finding of significance. The largest contribution at the cell level to the statistically significant Pearson Chi-square value in Table 4 (the third row of each results cell) was from one extended family member who responded that they did not know whether "each additional absence has a big effect on my child's reading ability" (6.0156). That value dwarfs the cell level contribution of those who strongly agreed (2.8756) with that proposition, followed closely by the failure of any respondents at all to disagree with it (2.4085). One of the nine

Table 6

Contingency Table for Caregiver Role by Q3 (Each Additional Absence has a Big Effect on my Child's Reading Ability)

Count Expected Cell Chi^2	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly Disagree	8 Don't Know	Total
Extended Family	6 3.04225 2.8756	1 2.15493 0.6190	0 2.40845 2.4085	1 1.26761 0.0565	1 0.12676 6.0156	9
Parent	18 20.9577 0.4174	16 14.8451 0.0899	19 16.5915 0.3496	9 8.73239 0.0082	0 0.87324 0.8732	62
Total	24	17	19	10	1	71

extended family member respondents joined the nine of 62 parents who strongly disagreed with the proposition. It is tempting to declare that the participants' responses overall suggest that parents held less strongly to the crucial role played by daily attendance on their children's reading ability than extended family members but the fact that the major contributor to the significant outcome of this finding was from a respondent who claimed they did not know the answer makes any such claim problematic.

With respect to daily attendance and its impact on math ability (Question 4), I find it interesting that, although the outcome was not significant, the greatest contribution to the Pearson Chi-square value in was again from the single "don't know" response from the same survey respondent.

Level of Rigor in the Current Grade: Question 15. Question 15 invited participants to offer their perspective on the level of the work that was expected of students at school. After excluding blank responses as discussed above, the majority (five out of eight) of extended family respondents indicated that their children's schoolwork was "more study-focused like middle school," as did the majority (35 out of 58) parents. There was no significant difference between the overall responses by members of the two caregiver role groups although I found it interesting to note that 15 out of 58 parents responded that they did not know—perhaps indicating some degree of lack of communication between the parents and the school. I wondered if the perception of the difficulty of schoolwork differed depending on the student grade level group of the student. Table 7 shows the breakdown of the responses across the two grade-level groupings and illustrates that the responses were comparable within each of the level of difficulty options.

Table 7

Comparable Responses across Grade-Level Groupings

		Level of Difficulty of Schoolwork			
Respondents' Role	Student Grade Level	More like preschool	More like middle school	Prefer not to say	Don't know
Extended Family	K-Grade 2	0	1	0	0
	Grade 3-5	1	4	1	1
Parent	K-Grade 2	5	15	2	7
	Grade 3-5	1	19	1	8

In terms of student gender, there was no significant difference among 42 respondents regarding the difficulty level of the schoolwork. As a final consideration regarding Question 15, I wondered if there was a difference of perception with respect to the caregiver education level (high school and below vs some college). After excluding blank responses, there was no significant difference between the responses of participants in the two levels of education with 23 out of 40 (58%) respondents with high school and below educational credentials and 18 out of 28 (64%) respondents with some college agreeing that the schoolwork was more like middle school.

Value of Parental Support Systems: Questions 16 through 18. Questions 16 through 18 addressed the respondents' social connection with the school. Question 16 asked whether the respondent believed they had a team of supporters outside the home environment. There was no significant difference between respondents on the basis of caregiver role. Five out of nine (56%) extended family respondents and 29 out of 60 (48%) parents responded that they had a team of supporters. Unfortunately, one of the choices muddied the water and gave respondents the opportunity to respond that they "both" had a team of supporters outside the home and that they were on their own. Taking the responses at their face value and adding the frequencies of those two responses, eight out of nine (89%) extended family respondents and 50 out of 60 (83%) parents appeared to be able to rely on others for support. There was also no significant difference regarding support on the basis of any of student grade, caregiver education level, or student gender.

With respect to Questions 17 and 18, there was again no significant difference in responses across the two caregiver roles. In response to Question 17, it is notable that four out of eight (50%) extended family respondents indicated that they had not thanked someone who

helped their child get to school or get home from school as did 12 out of 60 (20%) parent respondents. The majority of parents (44 out of 60; 73%) affirmed they had thanked such a person. There is some ambiguity in interpreting this question in that it is possible that respondents were not in a situation where their child needed to be transported to or from school by another person. Thus, their "did not thank" response may indicate that they did not need to avail of such help more than that they were withholding thanks from someone who had provided transportation.

In response to Question 18, again, there is no significant difference on the basis of caregiver role, but it is interesting that only one out of eight (13%) extended family members indicated that they did not know the name and contact information of a parent or another student in any grade in the school but 27 out of 60 (45%) parents were in this situation. This finding is a concern in an era in which "directory information" on families in schools is rarely divulged because of safety concerns. In bygone times, schools customarily distributed contact details among parents to foster mutual support. Even in this era of social media dominance, almost half of the parents who responded to the survey would apparently be unable to call upon another parent whose child attended the school—regardless of grade level—for help with transport or any other matter. The much smaller number of extended family member respondents were in a better position in this regard than parents—perhaps because they were older and were more well-established in the community (seven of the extended family respondents were grandparents).

School-Caregiver Interactions Regarding Student Absences: Questions 19 and 20, and 22 through 24. This set of questions focused on the interaction among the school and the respondent regarding the child's attendance. In interpreting the responses to these questions, it is important to note that this survey was distributed throughout the school and not just to the

caregivers of those children who had a record of poor attendance. These data are informative in that they provide an insight into the extent to which attendance might be an issue.

Excluding the responses from those who did not identify their caregiver role and those who did not respond to Question 19, 13 out of 61 (21%), respondents reported that they received phone calls from the school about their child's absence (one parent reported not knowing how to respond, no significant difference between parents and extended family caregivers). The percentage of respondents who received phone calls about their child's absence (21%) seems to me to be high, but this needs to be considered against the backdrop of 19% chronic absenteeism rate for PSD district wide (myFutureNC, 2020). This response seems to align with the rate I calculated for students on track to be considered chronically absent (having already missed 5 days) by the middle of second quarter at 32.6%. There was no significant difference between the responses on the basis of any of student grade, student gender, or caregiver education level.

Under the analogous exclusions, eight out of 68 (12%) of respondents to Question 20 in the caregiver role groups reported that they had received letters about their child's absence (again, no significant difference between parents and extended family caregivers). There was also no significant difference between the responses on the basis of any of student grade, student gender, or caregiver education level.

As Table 8 shows, only two out of 69 (3%) respondents with a caregiver role (one parent and one extended family member) reported having an in-person meeting regarding their child's absence with a school or district administrator during the school year (Question 22), six out of 69 (9%) respondents (two extended family caregivers and four parents) reported receiving formal letters through the mail about their child's absence from the school or school district (Question

Table 8

Action Taken Regarding Student Absences

	Yes		No		
Communication Strategy	Extended Family	Parent	Extended Family	Parent	*N*
Q. 22 In-person meeting	1	1	8	59	69
Q. 23 Formal letter in mail	2	4	7	56	69
Q. 24 Formal letter in backpack	2	4	7	56	69

23), and, in response to Question 24, the same breakdown of respondents reported receiving formal letters via the child's folder or backpack—although not the identical individuals (both extended family caregivers and one parent agreed to both questions). There were no significant differences based on caregiver role across any of these three questions. There was also no significant difference between the responses across these three questions on the basis of either student grade or student gender. However, in terms of caregiver education level, there was a greater probability (n = 39 "high school and below, 29 "some college"; Fisher's exact test = .0298, [one-tailed]) that caregivers who had attained "high school and below" education reported receiving formal letters regarding school absences through the mail than caregivers who had attained "some college," as shown in Table 9. The greatest contribution to the Pearson Chi-square value is the cell showing that no caregivers who attained "some college" had received a formal letter compared to the almost twice the expected number of "high school and below" caregivers who had received a formal letter. This lends some support to an interpretation that caregivers who have attained a higher level of education place a higher value on attendance at school.

Caregiver/Teacher Attendance at Parent-Teacher Conference: Question 21.

Returning to Question 21, respondents were invited to report whether they attended a parent-teacher conference with at least one of their child's teachers in the preceding fall. After excluding the relevant null responses among those with a caregiver role, 20 out of 60 (33%) parents reported that they did attend a parent-teacher conference but none of the nine extended family respondents reported doing so. There was a significant difference between the two groups of respondents (n = 9 extended family, 60 parent; Fisher's exact test = .0139 [two-tailed]). However, as shown in Table 10, the major contribution to the Pearson Chi-square value was the

Table 9

Caregiver Education Level Associated with Receipt of Formal Letters

Caregiver Education Level		Yes	No	*N*
High School & Below	Count	6	33	39
	Expected	3.44	35.56	
	Cell Contribution to Chi-square	1.90	0.18	
Some College	Count	0	29	29
	Expected	2.55	26.44	
	Cell Contribution to Chi-square	2.56	0.25	

Table 10

Attendance at Parent-Teacher Conferences

		Yes	No	Don't Know	*N*
Extended Family	Count	0	8	1	9
	Expected	2.61	6.26	0.13	
	Cell Contribution to Chi-square	2.61	0.48	5.80	
Parent	Count	20	40	0	60
	Expected	17.39	41.74	0.87	
	Cell Contribution to Chi-square	0.39	0.86	0.87	

single extended family respondent who reported that they did not know whether they had conferenced with their child's teacher. While this renders drawing inferences from this finding of significance problematic, it is interesting to note that among these respondents, only parents conferenced with their child's teacher. Referring back to the data, all extended family caregivers were grandparents (with one exception) and it is possible that they did not have the same energy and motivation to take full advantage of parent-teacher events as did the parents. There was no significant difference regarding attendance at parent-teacher conferences on the basis of any of student grade, student gender, or caregiver education level.

Additional Inquiries and Findings from the Parent Belief Survey. There were additional questions that I had regarding this data set that I would like to share. Firstly, I wanted to know if there was a relationship between the trust a parent has in the local education process (Questions 12 through 14) and parents' attitude towards elementary school attendance (Questions 3 through 10). I recoded the responses to each question involved in the comparison as ordinal numeric values where 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = don't know, 1 = disagree, and 0 = strongly disagree (all other responses were coded 999 and excluded from further analyses). As shown by the smooth curve in Figure 7 ($N = 59$), there is an overall more positive approach towards school attendance (Questions 3 through 10; possible range 0 through 32) the greater the respondent's level of trust in the local education process (Questions 12 through 14; possible range 0 through 12), however the association is not statistically significant. It is interesting to note that one respondent who had the second lowest level of trust in the local education process nevertheless had a quite positive attitude towards school attendance (see oval shape in Figure 7 at 2 on the "trust" X-axis), while the 44 respondents who demonstrated the three highest levels of

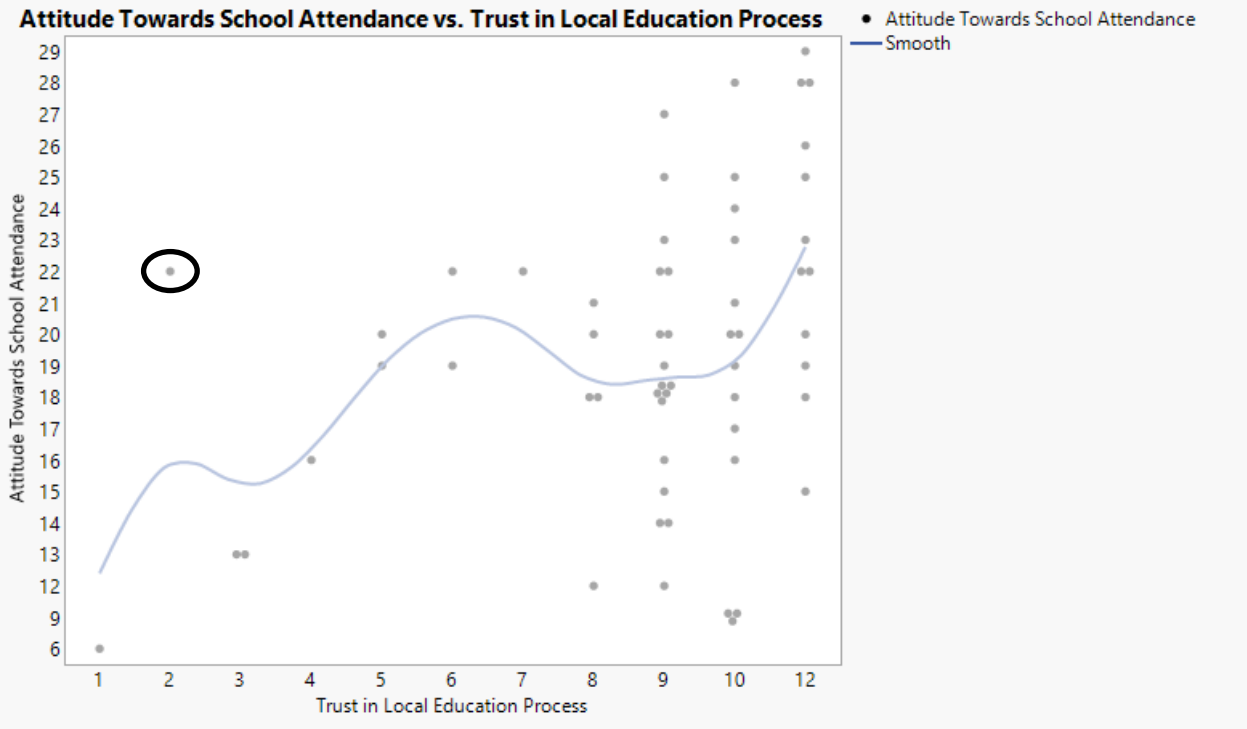


Figure 7. Relationship between attitudes towards schooling and trust in the local education process.

trust in the local education process (see scorers at 9, 10, and 11 on the "trust" X-axis) ran the gamut of attitudes towards schooling (from 9 through 29 on the "attendance" Y-axis).

Second, I wondered whether there were any association between respondents' beliefs regarding the impact of absences during elementary school and the likelihood of a child graduating from high school. There was no statistically significant relationship between beliefs in this context and the students' grade levels or gender, the ethnicity, educational level, or role of the caregiver, or the degree of warmth attributed to the relationship between caregiver and the child.

Third, I wondered whether there was a relationship between connection with other parents (Question 16 through 18) and parent's relationship with their child (Questions 1 & 2). I wanted to know whether parents who ranked their relationship with their child highly would also report a greater degree of engagement with others. However, there was no statistically significant relationship between what I defined operationally as connection with other parents (Question 16 recoded as 3 = I have a team of supporters, 2 = both, 1 = I am on my own, Questions 17 and 18 recoded as 1 = yes, 0 = no; all other responses coded as 999 and excluded from the analysis) and either Question 1 (warmth of relationship with child) or Question 2 (extent of disagreement about school attendance).

Fourth, I wanted to know if there was a relationship between respondents' level of trust in the local educational process (Questions 12 through 14) and their perception of the quality of education received (Question 15). Returning to the operationally defined trust in the local education process composite variable, I examined the relationship between it and the respondents' perception of the quality of the education children received at school. I found no statistically significant relationship between these two sets of variables.

Lastly, I wanted to know if there was a relationship between the between respondents' belief in the mechanism of school (Questions 3 through 10) and the perceived quality of education received (Question 15). I returned to the operationally defined attitude towards school attendance (Questions 3 through 10) and examined its relationship to the respondents' perception of the quality of education their child received (Question 15). Again, I found no statistically significant relationship between these two sets of variables.

Review of Student Attendance Records

Prior to this study and COVID, school-wide absenteeism on average was 11.6% (Hamilton Project, 2021). During Segment 1 (prior to data collection midway through first semester), I reviewed actual attendance from PowerSchool and found the school absenteeism rate to be at 32.6%, which was three times higher than previous attendance trends (see Table 11). The snapshot of student absentee rates for Grades 1 through 3 (43.8%, 38.8%, and 41.6% respectively) provided support for my decision to focus my intervention efforts to address problematic attendance on Grades 1 through 3. I set the threshold of absences at five because if a student misses approximately 3.75 days each quarter, they will be considered chronically absent. This snapshot was taken during the middle of the second quarter and if they had missed 5 or more days by this point, they would be on track to being chronically absent.

Segment 2: Research Phase

During the research phase, I used the following research data collection instrumentation (see Table 1): attendance data from Power School, field notes (both mine and those of the Check & Connect partner), parent interview phone calls, and intervention team evaluation feedback. Attendance data were used to inform the overarching research question and Research Question 2. I took three snapshots of absenteeism data on the student level pulled from PowerSchool and

Table 11

Preliminary Snapshot of Students in Danger of Problematic Attendance

Grade Level	K	1	2	3	4	5	*N*
Students Per Grade	28	16	24	24	24	28	144
Students meeting absence Threshold (5 or more days missed)	11	7	7	4	10	8	47
Percent of Students per grade to meet threshold	39.2	43.7	29.1	16.6	41.6	28.5	32.6

Note. Overall School Absenteeism Percentage (mid-2nd qtr.) = 32.6%.

calculated the days missed per student and then for the students in total. I used field notes to inform the overarching research question. I used parent interviews to inform Research Question 3 on the implications of problematic attendance, and the team evaluation feedback informed the overarching research question. My adoption of a mixed methods approach allowed me to use both qualitative and quantitative data to formulate answers to my research questions.

Table 12 highlights the students and their parent/guardian who participated in the Check & Connection intervention. The majority of the students that participated identified as Black or African American (n = 4, 80%). There was one student that identified as White (n = 1, 20%). The race and ethnicity demographics for parents/guardian of the five students mirrored that of the students. All parent respondents were females. Guardian 3 and Parent 3 in this study are the same adult participant. They serve as the parent to Student 5 and guardian to Student 3.

Overview of Quantitative Data from the Intervention

I was able to capture data on students accumulated absences based upon three snapshots as shown in Figure 8. The first snapshot shows students' absences at the start of the intervention. The second snapshot captures the cumulative absences during the middle of the intervention. And the third snapshot shows students' total absences at the end of the intervention. The chart also captures the difference of days missed between each snapshot. This provides a picture of how student absences either increased or decreased between the first and second snapshot, and then between the second and third snapshot. When reviewing the data, each student decreased the number of days that they were absent between the mid-intervention snapshot and the end of intervention snapshot. For example, Student 1 had missed 16 days at the beginning of the intervention. From that point to the middle of the intervention, he missed another 37 days. However, as the student begin to further experience the intervention, they only missed 28 days

Table 12

Demographics of Students Who Participated in the Intervention

Student	Grade	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Parent/ Guardian	Participating Parent or Guardian Race/Ethnicity	Parent Gender
Student 1	2	Black	Male	Parent1	Black	Female
Student 2	1	White	Male	Parent2	White	Female
Student 3	3	Black	Female	Guardian3	Black	Female
Student 4	2	Black	Female	Parent4	Black	Female
Student 5	3	Black	Female	Parent3	Black	Female

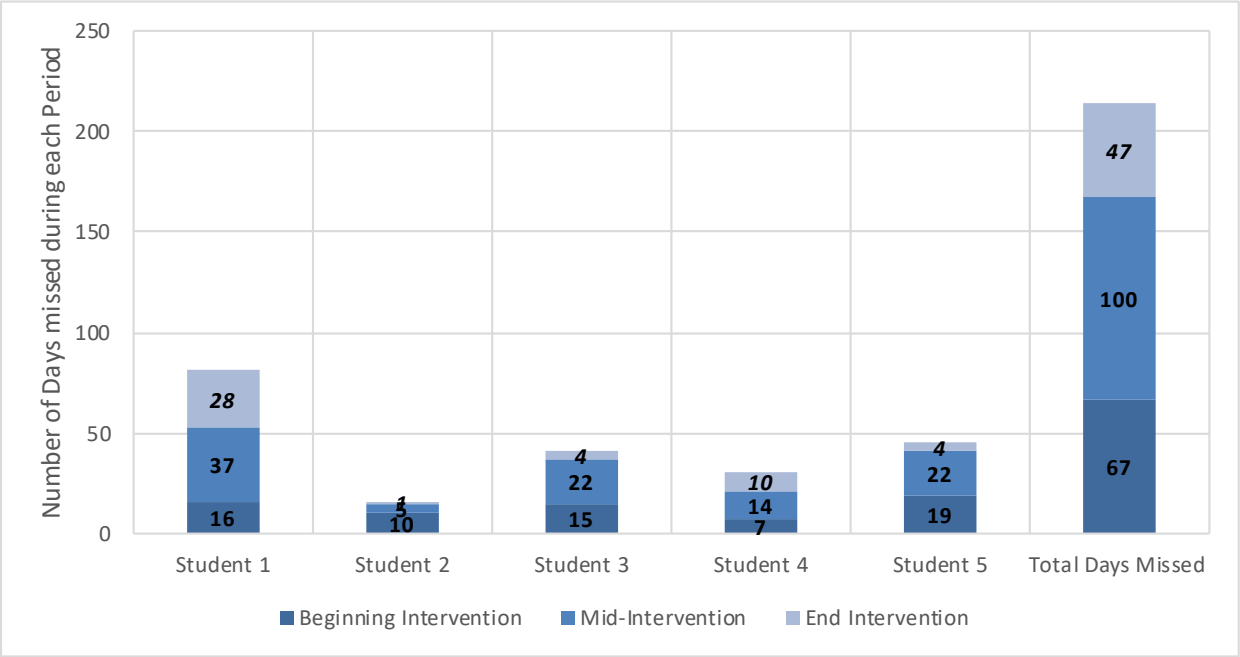


Figure 8. Snapshot of cumulative absences captured of students in intervention.

between the middle and end of the intervention. Thus, reducing the number of days by 9. I would also like to highlight Student 2. This student missed 10 days prior to the start of the intervention. They then missed 5 days between the beginning and middle, and only 1 day between the middle and end. Hence reducing the number of missed between the two periods by 4. The number of combined participants days missed during the second snapshot was 1.5 times more than the first. Yet, there was a decrease in missed days during the last period by 53 combined participant days.

Overview of Qualitative Data from the Intervention

To recap, my intervention consisted of (a) implementing Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018)—an intervention system that was designed to keep students engaged and connected to school, and (b) an outreach to parents to ensure they remained abreast of their child's attendance and shared their beliefs about the importance of students' early educational experiences.

My initial plan was to check-in with parents myself at the end of every 3-week cycle to provide them with an update of where their child attendance was and to dialogue with them about my shared attendance information. The goal of this regular check-in schedule was for me to determine why students were not attending (if appropriate) or to applaud them if their child was attending school regularly. This plan was very challenging as I had not anticipated the barriers imposed by COVID-19. It became difficult to coordinate times to chat with parents with timely liaison with the school to obtain the data I needed for each dialogue. Families were dealing with illnesses and other family circumstances which made connecting as regularly as I had planned a major challenge. After consulting with the intervention team, I began making connections with parents during each research cycle. I aligned my outreach to synchronize with my sending home outreach flyers to parents that included (a) the student attendance data (e.g., your child has missed X1 days since the start of the school year and X2 days since the study

began), (b) a "Did you know?" key fact (e.g., literacy is linked to skill development), and (c) a succinct explanation of that key fact. For example, one explanation of a key fact was:

> Students in Grades K through 3 who do not attend school regularly are in danger of not developing the skills needed to be a good reader.
>
> Students who fail to read at grade level by the end of Grade 3 are four times more likely than students who achieve proficiency to drop out of high school.
>
> According to research, kids that read on grade level by Grade 3 generally graduate high school at higher rates and earn higher wages than kids who don't.

I wrote each research-based message from sources such as attendanceworks.org, myfuturenc.org, and checkandconnect.umn.edu. I geared each message to providing awareness to parents of where their child stood and then supporting that awareness by focusing their attention on how absenteeism can impact a students' academic success.

As it related to the students, they engaged daily with their Check partner and at least once every 2 weeks with their Connect partner. I initially planned that each student would meet with their Connect partner weekly to participate in conversations that would entail goal setting and problem solving. However, due to the schedule of the Connect partner (who was the school social worker and served two schools), they were not able to ensure that they met with students weekly. However, the Connect partner did sustain regular touch points with the students, conducted conversations with parents, and provided goal setting where needed. Arising from the students' connection to both their Check and their Connect partners, they received rewards from the treasure box that I provided the schools. The school supplemented the treasure box rewards with an additional level of rewards through the Positive Behavioral Intervention System (PBIS)

store. Participating students were able to receive rewards not only for attendance but also for exhibiting attributes such as helpfulness and increased classroom participation.

The qualitative data I gathered during the intervention not only provided me with insight into how students were responding to the intervention, it also provided me with more insight into the root causes of chronic absenteeism at TES. I gathered data from parents, intervention team members, and some feedback shared by students with their Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018) partner.

When I examined the data with respect to root causes and pondered the bioecological context of the problem, proximal issues emerged across the participants' interviews—which I corroborated by referring to the Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018) partners. I have characterized most of these as proximal issues to emphasize that these are downstream outcomes of "bigger picture" issues that originated from the broader systemic context. Those proximal issues are captured in Table 13 and include: (a) lack of transportation, (b) lack of a family support system, (c) student issues (e.g., low motivation, little belongingness, inappropriate sleep, emotional issues), (d) family issues, (e) academic challenges, (f) temporary illness, and (g) issues with teacher/school. There were three issues that were not recurring among students: lack of belonging at school (Student 1), lack of sleep (Student 5), and emotional issues (Student 3). Three out of the five students (Students 1, 3, & 5) experienced five or more of the issues. On the other hand, two out of the five students (Students 2 & 4) experienced only one of the ten issues, namely temporary illness.

As I evaluated the proximal causes identified in Table 13, it appeared to me that Student 3 and Student 5 were dealing with multiple barriers that warrant attention. These two students were related and often were together in the same dwelling. The issues they faced were very much

Table 13

Proximal Causes of Attendance Issues

Issues	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Lack of transportation			X		X
Lack of family support (e.g., no one to assist working parent with childcare)			X	X	X
Lack of motivation	X		X		X
Lack of belonging at school	X				
Lack of sleep (i.e., oversleeping or tired)					X
Emotional issues			X		
Family issues			X		X
Academic challenges	X				X
Temporary illness (e.g., cold, headache, etc.)	X	X	X	X	X
Issues with teacher/school	X		X		

aligned with environmental barriers that occurred within the micro- and macro-ecological systems as framed by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005). In Bronfenbrenner's concept, the microsystem involves the students' immediate environment that influences outcomes such as lack of family support and family issues. The macrosystem consists of barriers that impact families by means of external forces, in which in this instance may involve poverty, a lack of transportation, and illness (which can be linked to lack of access to quality health care in rural, low socioeconomic status areas).

As I think about the issue of lack of motivation, Check & Connect (Robinson et al., 2018) intervention was designed to reengage students and help improve, in my study, their attendance at school. Student 1, Student 3, and Student 5 presented this issue. Parents made comments about their child such as "not interested" and "don't want to go." One of the intervention team members noted that Student 1 declared "I don't like school." These three students lacked a sense of interest in being at school. However, during their focused engagement with my intervention, Student 3 and Student 5 showed more interest in showing-up to school. They seemed to have responded to the daily check-ins with their Check partner, the recognition given to them by the team (e.g., "you are doing a great job"), and the treats from the treasure box that they received as a reward for meeting their attendance goals (supplemented by rewards from the PBIS shop).

Student 2 was unique among the participants. Their attendance was moving in the direction of being chronically absent. During my first conversation with the parent, they noted that if the child woke up and was not feeling well, then they were not making the child go to school. Although the parent did not feel as though there were any real issues with their child missing school, when I approached them about being in the study they were very willing to participate. Although Student 2 missed days due to illness, their missed days drastically reduced,

and the parent was more vigilant in ensuring their child attended school. Equally, the child responded very well to the rewards and intervention team engagement.

Student 3, Student 4, and Student 5 were identified as lacking family support although I could not identify any specific way in which their families felt unsupported. It does, however, cause me to reflect upon the results from the school wide Parent Belief Survey. Of the 73 respondents to Question 16, 37 (50.7%) indicated that they had a team of supporters on whom they could rely, 12 (16.4%) indicated that they were on their own, and, confusingly, 24 (32.9%) indicated that they were on their own but also had a team of supporters. Again, it is worth noting that Student 3 and Student 5 are related and often spent nights together, suggesting that any attendance issue that impacted one also impacted the other.

Although I would have appreciated having all students that had attendance issues reflected in my intervention data, I accepted the realities of the situation and worked within the bounds of possibility. In this instance, I would have not chosen students within the same family although I agreed with the rationale proposed by the intervention team to provide support to not just one student in the family, but the two that were at risk of failing if no intervention was provided.

Another source of data for my study involved identifying the frequency or the prevalence issues that seemed to be present among the intervention participants directly from the participating caregivers and—in a few instances—as relayed to me from team members**.** Table 14 captures those themes/issues, the prevalence of the issue, and quotes/paraphrases from parents/guardians' check-ins and team members. It appears that the three out of 10 of the issues that occurred the most frequently among the participants were lack of family support (60%), lack of motivation (60%), and temporary illness (100%). Again, I believe that the unanimous

Table 14

Absenteeism Themes and Prevalence amongst Participants

Absenteeism Themes	Prevalence	Caregivers' Perspective (some paraphrased)
Lack of motivation	60%	"No ma'am, (student) is not interested"
Temporary illness	100%	"When (student) wakes up and is not feeling well, I will not send (them) to school" "(Student) had headache" "(Student) has epilepsy, sometimes he wakes up real weak. I keep him home because I don't want him to be around other children" "Some of the week (student) wake up but be sick or at night she'll be sick and I don't want to infect nobody" "Nosebleeds that will come out, out the blue"
Lack of family support (e.g., no one to assist working parent with child(ren))	60%	"My mom is not really in my life" "I'm a mother of seven" "(Student) likes to stay up late, so (student) be sleepy in the morning" A guardian mentioned they had to care for their mother and was unable to get the kids to school "Cause there's four of them, I have to send off to school in the morning (without support)"
Academic Issues	40%	"(Student) hard of learning. He's got a hard head" "(Student) needed help" "(Student) has a hard time reading, (student) wants me to talk with someone about helping"
Lack of transportation	40%	"I just got a vehicle now, so (student) don't even got to worry about not going to school" "I guess they (family member) didn't have proper transportation to get (the child) back and forth to school and back"

Table 14 (continued)

Absenteeism Themes	Prevalence	Caregivers' Perspective (some paraphrased)
Issues with teacher/school	40%	"(Student) don't want to go because (student) don't feel like the teacher like them" "(Student) felt like the teacher wasn't being fair to (them)" "(Student) used to come home and felt like, you know, (they) needed help, but it was like, nobody cared" "(Student) was feeling some type of way about (teacher)" "No, I don't be talking to them (teachers)"
Family Issues	40%	"I had to take care of my mom and take her to her appointments" "but last week my mom in the hospital, so I basically been with her"
Lack of belonging at school	20%	Student doesn't really "want to be there"
Emotional Issues	20%	Student has "bouts" of emotion, crying, fits on multiple occasions
Lack of sleep	20%	"I think it's more of (student) being up late"

reference to illness as a reason for absence may have been different had COVID-19 not been a major factor. Three out of 10 of the issues with the lowest frequencies among the participants were emotional issues, lack of sleep, and lack of belonging at school.

Integrating Data

I designed my study using a mixed methods action research approach to develop an understanding of the phenomena of chronic absenteeism at TES. Having considered the data separately, I now move to reflecting on the results noted above through each phase of the study to arrive at some findings that rest on the integration of my data sources.

Overarching Research Question

Several data sources inform my perspective on the overarching research question for my study. To what extent can a targeted intervention implemented through an action research design improve problematic school attendance among students within a rural Title I school? The data analyzed above are supplemented by other sources including the attendance data, field notes from the intervention team, and the intervention impact survey.

Prior to this study and COVID-19, school-wide absenteeism at TES on average was 11.6% (Hamilton Project, 2021). During the exploratory phase prior to data collection mid-way through the first semester, my review of actual attendance from PowerSchool found the TES absentee rate to be at 32.6%, which was three times higher than previous attendance data (see Table 11). This snapshot reinforced the need to focus my intervention efforts on Grades 1 through 3 to address problematic attendance behaviors. I used these preliminary findings in collaboration with my TES collaborators to drill down into the data at the actual student level to determine which five students would be invited to participate in the Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) attendance intervention.

As the students engaged with the intervention over the research cycles, I took snapshots of attendance from PowerSchool. Figure 8 shows a whole-year view of each individual student's attendance. As noted earlier, collectively, absenteeism decreased by 53 days. Feedback from the intervention team provided additional insight into students' behaviors/attitudes, response to rewards, and an example of the types of actions the team had to take to address students' needs. A few of the notations excerpted from their field notes are illustrative:

> I am pleased to report that four of our five students received rewards today. They were excited and smiling all the way to the principal's office. They seem genuinely happy that we are reaching out to them each morning, welcoming them to school, and reminding them how important they are to us and TES.
>
> Most of the days the student was positive in class and tried to complete her class assignments. Her attendance improved in the fourth quarter.
>
> They (student) were able to go to the PBIS store (for rewards). The student was able to also earn (additional) incentives from her teacher.
>
> The team had to reach out to the "Community Liaison Specialist" for (Student 1) due to his continued "miss days", "misbehaving" in class, and low academic engagement.

At the end of my study, I sent an Impact/Outcome Evaluation survey (see Appendix F) to the three intervention team members to gain their perspective on the intervention. Responses shown in Table 15 reflect the team opinions on the impact of the intervention on student attendance as well as the parts of the intervention they felt were most effective. The team members unanimously indicated that the intervention was very effective in encouraging students to meet regularly with their Check partner.

Table 15

Chronic Absenteeism Intervention Impact Survey: Intervention Team Responses

To what extent would you rate the effectiveness of the intervention to:	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective
1a. Improve students' willingness to attend school	1	2	0
1b. Reduce the number of days absent	1	2	0
1c. Encourage students to meet regularly w/C&C partner	3		
1d. Encourage student participation and engagement in class	1	2	0
1e. Increase parent engagement	1	2	0
1f. Improve parents' response to communications	1	2	0

With respect to Question 2 on the Impact/Outcome Evaluation survey (what part of the intervention do you feel was most effective?), there was consensus around three of the four options as being the most effective: daily check-ins with the Check partner, rewards for regular attendance, and phone calls to parents. Only one team member felt that the outreach flyer to parents was most effective.

My conclusion is that intervention was effective as evidenced by student attendance data as noted in Figure 8 as well as the sense that I gained from parents through my communications with them. Through each of my parent interactions they were very cooperative and seemed genuinely willing to participate in each the conversations. I also think that the students' excitement regarding their daily check-ins and the rewards system served as a reinforcement to parents about the excitement that their children had about attending school. The results support that my intervention implemented through an action research approach improved problematic school attendance among the students within the intervention. Student days were reduced by 53 days, qualitative data showed that students responded favorably to the intervention (i.e., to rewards and check-ins), parents were cooperative during routine check-ins, and evaluative feedback from the intervention team supported this finding.

Research Question 1

My first research question under the umbrella of my overall research question was how do the perceptions of the value of elementary school attendance among parents of chronically absent students contribute to the problematic attendance of students in TES? I started with the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018) to gather quantitative data that informed the questions for a semi-structured interview to gather more in-depth qualitative data. As I

mentioned previously, there were several data points that illuminated overall how parents perceived the value of elementary school attendance.

There was a strong sense from the quantitative and qualitative data that parents find value in their children attending school regularly. Questions 5 and 8 of the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018; see Table 5) explored the value that caregivers of students at TES placed on school attendance. Their responses pointed to a shared agreement around the critical importance of consistent school attendance. By seeming contrast, participants' responses to Question 6 revealed a lack of consensus around the connection between missing days in elementary school and the likelihood of missing days in middle and high school. I conclude that respondents were not convinced of the linkage implied by Question 6. The importance that the majority of caregivers attached to daily attendance came through again in their response to Question 7 ("it's okay for my child to be absent for a few days each month, as long as they are excused absences") which showed that 59% of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed. There was strong consensus—almost unanimous agreement—again in Questions 8 and 9 around the thought that daily attendance is important to remain on track for the next grade and beyond.

Essentially, these responses from the caregivers of TES students tell me that they value their child's regular attendance at school and that they see the future impact that early learning has on successful outcomes later in their K-12 journey. I was able to effectively gather the perceptions of only one of the caregivers of the five TES students with problematic attendance, but their sentiments aligned with those of the survey participants:

"No parent should just let their child not come to school"

"I think they get more education at school than they do at home"

"They get more education in school than out of school"

"If they don't go to school every day then they're going to be falling behind"

Research Question 2

I generated this research question to explore to what extent would a focused outreach revise the perceptions of parents of the educational importance of students attending school regularly. In the context of COVID-19, I was unable to establish an effective connection with the caregivers of the five students with problematic attendance at TES. However, circumstantial indications—mainly the dramatic decrease in days absent (see Figure 8)—indicate to me that caregivers of those five students may have revised their perceptions of the importance of regular attendance. I have no way of gauging whether the dramatic decrease of days absent had more to do with a type of Hawthorne effect (individuals being observed during the course of an intervention change their behavior because they are being observed as opposed to because of the impact of the intervention) that operated at the caregiver's level than to the impact of my intervention itself. However, from the students' perspective—as the field notes from the intervention team members indicated—the students' engagement in the school environment underwent a noteworthy improvement. Perhaps the caregivers' revision of their perceptions of the importance of daily attendance trickled down to their young charges. Perhaps the Check & Connect (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, n.d.) protocol so energized the children that their enthusiasm reoriented the perceptions of their caregivers. I prefer to conjecture that there was a synergy among the elements of my intervention but there are not enough data to indicate whether the outreach to the caregivers had an impact on improving student attendance, if it was the combination of the outreach with the Check & Connect intervention, or if it was simply the impact of the Check & Connect protocol.

Research Question 3

I devised this question to examine the factors implicated in problematic attendance at TES (e.g., root cause, historical trajectory) and the ecological/cultural context of that problematic attendance. I was able to capture qualitative data from conversations with parents and notes from the intervention team. Several of the causes that emerged from those data can be found in Tables 13 and 14.

As I review the themes that arose, it supported Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework on multiple and overlapping issues that impact the student hence creating barriers to regular school attendance. Table 14 lists the prevalence of reoccurring themes that participants listed as barriers: lack of motivation, temporary illness, lack of family support, academic issues, lack of transportation, issues with teacher/school, and family issues. When I consider these issues individually, I drew parallels to Bronfenbrenner's (1995) domains. These themes are classified by one of the domains micro-, meso-, exo-, or macrosystem. The issue of lack of motivation and academic issues could fall in either the micro or mesosystem domain. However based upon the participants in this study and the qualitative data collected lack of motivation, issues with teacher/school, and academic issues appear to fall in the microsystem. The microsystem refers to the developing person and their interactions within their immediate environment such as relationships within the home, church, school, or neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The mindset and behavior of the students in this study that were classified as unmotivated are the result of either their home environment or the school environment (see parental quotes, Table 14). The issues that students had with their teacher, are connected to the school environment, and does not appear to be linked between both school and home environments (mesosystem).

Summary

The emergence of COVID-19 severely impacted my ability to conduct my study as I designed it. I made several ad hoc decisions in relation to data gathering and research site selection (in consultation with the Chair of my dissertation committee and with school district administrators) to maintain the intention of my study in the face of challenges that school systems across the country had never encountered previously. The caregivers of students attending TES responded in heartening numbers to the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018) which I take as an indication of the importance they attached to having their voices heard. The fact that I had to make paper copies of the Parent Belief Survey available to elicit such a heartening response is indicative of the technological issues that beset many rural areas in rural North Carolina. There were very few individual questions or sets of questions on the survey on which participants' perspectives differed significantly across the multiple notional groupings I devised. I have crafted responses to each of my research questions based on the data that I was able to gather.

Based on my reflections on my findings, in Chapter 5 I will discuss six key points of interest arising from my study. First, school-wide absenteeism increased three-fold as result of COVID-19 prior to the start of my study. Second, caregivers reported holding shared beliefs around the critical importance of early education for long-term success and associated educational success with regular school attendance. Third, there was no consensus among caregivers regarding either the implied association between poor attendance and unsatisfactory graduation outcomes or poor school attendance habits now and poor school attendance later. Fourth, although the demographics of the respondents of the Parent Belief Survey (Robinson et al., 2018) varied notably, there were few significant differences across survey questions. Fifth,

my intervention showed promising results on absenteeism by the end of my study, especially when the entire academic year was considered. Last, and perhaps most important, there were similar root causes of absenteeism across caregivers that could at least partly explain why there is a difference between beliefs regarding the importance of daily attendance from the Parent Belief Survey and student absenteeism.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to implement an intervention to lessen chronic student absenteeism rates in Grade 1 through Grade 3 and sharpen parents' perceptions of the value of early education at TES. This work is informed by three theoretical frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework, and Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Simpkins et al., 2012). For the methodological approach, I utilized administrative records, surveys, and semi-structured interviews to gather quantitative and qualitative data. For data analysis, I employed descriptive statistics and adopted a mixed-methods approach oriented to thematic analyses.

Summary of the Findings

There were six main findings that I will discuss in this chapter. First, administrative records revealed that school-wide absenteeism had increased three-fold subsequent to COVID-19 and prior to the start of my study. Second, there were key findings in the survey data that illuminated parents shared beliefs around the critical importance of early education for long-term success outcomes and regular school attendance. The third finding is quite interesting. Although parents shared such beliefs, there was not a shared agreement about whether they felt that poor attendance could impact students' graduating from school nor that poor attendance led to poor attendance later in their academic journey. The fourth finding that I was not expecting was that, although respondents (who consisted of parents and guardians) were from varied educational levels, different race/ethnicities, and genders there were no standout beliefs across the survey that were significantly different among the groups. The fifth finding was that the intervention showed promising results in that absenteeism was reduced by 53 combined participant days by the end of the study period. Finally, one of the most heartening findings was that the root causes

identified among participants supported my conjecture that parents value education and school attendance in spite of there being external factors that posed challenges for their child to attend school regularly.

Interpretation of the Findings

There were several key findings that are essential to addressing this student absenteeism problem. My intervention—implemented through an action research design--showed great promise in being able to improve problematic school attendance among elementary students within a rural Title I school. By using an ecological/cultural framework, I was able to evaluate the problem from a micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems lens to support parents and students and to increase student attendance. My approach was supported by the Bronfenbrenner theoretical framework which suggests that multiple overlapping environmental contexts influence individual behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005).

My intervention was prescriptive in that it provided individualized supports to students. Students were matched with partners that they trusted and who provided them with consistent accountability. Support services were offered by intervention partners to address barriers whether they were outside or inside the school. For example, an outside case worker was engaged by the school administrators for one of the students to help address both their attendance and classroom behaviors. For a few of the students, the school social worker visited their homes to "check-in" on them as missed days were occurring on a persistent basis.

I contend that parents' behaviors may not necessarily be representative of their values regarding school attendance. For example, in my study, parents did not approve of missing school outside of doctor's appointment and serious family trauma which is more conservative than the district allowances for excusable absences. Parents felt strongly that any missed days

could lead to lost instruction and cause students to fall behind. They felt that this was counterproductive to staying on track as they valued the quality of the education that their child was receiving. Numerous studies have shown a relationship between absenteeism and lower standardized scores, low grade level achievement, socio-economic impacts later in life, and trajectories of future educational performance and attainment (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2017; Goffried, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014). Parents' positive attitudes towards attendance and the value of education, however, do not align well with the reality of persistent chronic absenteeism. The root cause of the problem seems to go beyond parent perceptions and may be more related to external and environmental barriers such as those posed by poverty.

The findings from my intervention raise questions regarding the merits of focused outreach to parents as a way of improving attendance. Given that parents highly valued daily attendance per the school-wide survey results, the observed improvement in attendance cannot not be directly linked to the parent outreach flyers. In addition, other intervention elements could be at play such as student engagement by administrative staff and student rewards for attendance. Although this is an indirect influence of the intervention through focused outreach to the child, research by Simpkins et al. (2012) suggested that if parents have a positive expectancy-value of education then both their behaviors and their child's behaviors could drive positive educational outcomes, including good attendance. Parents' willingness to participate in my study - and to allow their children to do so - illuminated their alignment to the idea of expectancy-value where if parents perceive value of a certain domain, then they will allow their children to participate in that domain. Overall, I believe that the check-in with parents was of value because it consistently

confronted parents with the reality of their child's attendance which served as motivation considering the value they placed on the importance of education.

The multi-pronged approach of my intervention was critical because there is not just one thing that influences absenteeism. There were numerous factors that were identified as root causes of problematic attendance among the intervention group. Results supported my belief that providing students with accountability, support, and rewards for attendance would curb expected absenteeism. What is promising about the intervention is that it addressed some of the identified thematic root causes of absenteeism for our sample, low motivation. Low student motivation was highlighted as an issue by a couple parents. My intervention may have directly addressed this lack of motivation by arousing the interest of the child through greater school accountability and incentives. Multiple studies, as highlighted in What Works Clearinghouse (2015), found that the Check & Connect framework induced positive educational outcomes through evidence-based school engagement practices.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study is the small sample of five students and their corresponding five parents/guardians who participated in the intervention. My design was created to provide insights into chronic absenteeism at TES, so my findings do not generalize beyond this context. I believe that my findings offer key insights that may be generative of hypotheses for future studies. Ideally, future studies would recruit a larger sample size for the intervention and recruit a comparison group to increase the overall number of study participants and enable comparison of outcomes between treatment and comparison groups. I would venture to say, although my study suffered design limitations, it provided an opportunity to trial a multi-pronged approach to addressing a perennial problem.

I am proud of surmounting the many challenges that I face because of the major limitation of COVID-19 which required multiple changes to my planned study design. I had to adjust during the collection process as high instances of COVID-19 impacted families within both Segment 1 and Segment 2 of my study. For example, during Segment 1, because of the rise of COVID-19, I decided to hold the focus group virtually. Similarly to the virtual parent survey, this exposed the barriers to reliable broadband and potential difficulty of parents to participate virtually. During the Segment 2, it was very challenging to communicate with parents during the rise of illness. I have noted the implications of conducting my study during the COVID-19 pandemic in more depth within the introduction, methods, and results section of my paper.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

This study highlights that there is a difference between parent beliefs on the importance of daily attendance and they behaviors as reflected in the actual recorded absenteeism of some children. There were several root causes that were shared amongst two or more of the families represented in this study. The issue of lack of (student) motivation was raised several times in my earlier conversations with parents. Some of the issues associated with lack of motivation that surfaced were that students (a) did not like school, (b) did not feel liked or valued by the teacher, or (c) confronted academic challenges that caused them to feel unsuccessful. Another factor raised was temporary illness. Some of the illnesses listed by parents were headache, common cold, and viruses (e.g., COVID-19). Within many rural districts, students have limited access to quality healthcare as well as school nurses. The persistence of this issue among students may lead to continued absenteeism. Other root causes that emerged were lack of a family support network and lack of transportation. As lack of family support was lifted by parents as a barrier, it should be noted that this is a perception that parents held. This does not necessarily mean that family members simply chose not to support but they could possibly be experiencing competing

demands and barriers themselves. Yet, the persistence of these barriers can exacerbate the attendance gap as these issues may be beyond the control of individual families.

An implication for practice is that chronic absenteeism should not be viewed simply as a parental issue. It would be advantageous for district practitioners to put systems in place that offer help to support families and remove barriers that impact student attendance. For example, schools could provide teachers with the latitude to help track students down when they are missing. They could also encourage teachers to serve as check partners consistently holding students accountable for showing up at school and providing genuine interest in their success. Additionally, these systems can be both internal to the school organization as well as involve external partner agencies such as non-profits and city/county government.

An implication for policy is that policy makers should work to ensure that chronic absenteeism is not simply handled as an issue of violation of truancy laws. Laws and policies need to be written to support the creation of successful outcomes for families by ensuring that families receive the supports necessary to be successful versus handling the issue in a punitive manner. The policy approach needs to be more proactive and supportive as opposed to reactive and punitive. Current policies also need to be evaluated to ensure that segments of the population that are historically marginalized (such as African Americans) are not more harshly dealt with than their non-marginalized counterparts.

Implications for further research include the further investigation of the correlation between parents' belief regarding the value of education and their behaviors/actions regarding sending their children to school--especially when they are dealing with barriers due to poverty. My study showed that, although chronic absenteeism is high at TES, parents do value education—suggesting that there are other environmental pressures and systemic barriers at

work. As Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Simpkins et al., 2012) posits, mothers (parents) that likely to be involved in activities that support their beliefs, particularly when they are align to their child's ability and the value of their participation in that domain. Hence, if parents' value their children attending school – as my study highlights from the Parent Belief Survey – then they would ensure their children are at school. However, there seems to be a disconnect between what this theory posits and parents' behaviors. Further research could explore what I perceive as a disconnect between perception and practice to unearth how barriers can be addressed, thereby potentially closing the gap between belief and action. Essentially, a sufficient focus on the barriers and ways in which to remove them would require using frameworks that incorporates systems change for equity particularly for populations that are historically underserved.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

The context of this study was a Title I school that is embedded within a rural community with high instances of poverty. The implications of my findings relative to equity at the intersection of rural communities and poverty are that chronic absenteeism cannot be viewed in isolation. The effects of poverty in rural communities are compounded, hence I highly recommend efforts to remove systemic barriers through the collective efforts of school, local government, and community leaders. Such partnership efforts are being enacted across the state through the efforts of entitles such as NC Rural Center (https://www.ncruralcenter.org/) which is working to build rural community leaders who both understand the dynamics of rural poverty and are equipped with skills to creatively address barriers within their local communities.

Approaches to addressing educational inequities—especially in terms of the most fundamental issue of attendance at school—can best be made from a systems perspective. Such

systemic efforts would empower local teams to address barriers such as transportation, family support, and even access to quality medical care.

Recommendations for Practice

I recommend addressing the root causes of the four main themes of absenteeism identified in this study. They include student motivation, parent transportation, family support, and student illnesses.

In terms of student motivation, I suggest that schools place just as much emphasis on the mental and emotional wellness for students as they do on academics. The striking responsiveness of students to the welcome and acceptance they received from the intervention team and the reward system seems to have made an impact on student attitudes towards school. One student remarked that they really loved receiving the "treats from the treasure chest." Considering these results, a recommendation for schools is to ensure that they are meeting the social-emotional needs of children. This component needs to be regarded just as essential as providing rigorous instruction. I recommend districts adopt a targeted intervention that addresses these aspects of the child and that it be embedded within their existing academic curriculum plan. The fact that the students' attitudes changed from "low motivation" to being excited speaks volumes.

For transportation, I recommend that transportation barriers be removed by establishing a creative approach to busing for families. An example of this could be to establish a cab system, like Lyft or Uber, whereby local government might offset the cost for families by absorbing much of the cost. This service can be also used by citizens who have problems with maintaining employment due to transportation issues. Perhaps the cost could be offset through the county tax base and even state and federal grants geared towards rural development.

For family supports, I recommend that a seamless partnership be created among local entities (local nonprofits, city/county government, etc.) to ensure a fluid approach to addressing barriers for families. Such a partnership could be instrumental in dismantling systemic barriers that impede particularly families in poverty. An example of such a partnership is aligning and leveraging services offered by nonprofit agencies and government agencies to ensure that gaps in service are non-existent.

And for student illness, I recommend that, at the school level, personnel ensure that student environments are clean and sanitized to prevent the spread of contagious diseases among student populations. At the district level, I recommend that school nurses be made available in every school. When that is not possible, I recommend that schools create strong partnerships with local clinics so onsite health clinics can be held regularly. There is value in increasing student access to quality care to help mitigate instances of illnesses.

Recommendations for Future Study

I see the potential for several future studies extending from my research. Firstly, I recommend that my study be replicated with an increased sample size to include more students. Secondly, I propose that the study period be extended. If there had been more time, I believe that the effect would have been even more substantial. Thirdly, I recommend that in the light of the belief of parents in the value of education and the importance of student attendance, greater research around parental attitudes and the impact of rural poverty on educational outcomes (e.g., attendance, academic success) need to be addressed.

Conclusions

Even in a rural and low resource settings, parents value daily attendance despite their students' absentee records. However, they may lack a range of infrastructural supports needed to

actualize daily attendance. Such supports may include factors closely related to student motivation, transportation, social support network, and student health promotion.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

My research journey has been one of perseverance, dedication, and growth. As an educational leader, I feel that my development as both a scholar and practitioner has prepared me to be an even better leader in the educational field. My growth in data literacy has translated to my current work in statewide educational attainment. I have also learned how theoretical frameworks drive the design of work implemented in a practical setting. I have learned through the journey the value of being a scholarly practitioner. In that, I am committed to research-based practices within program implementation and evaluation.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2004). *Early intervention can improve low-income children's cognitive skills and academic achievement.* https://www.apa.org/research/action/early#

Attendance Works. (2014). *Attendance in the early grades: Why it matters for reading* [Research brief]. https://buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Attendance-in-the-Early-Grades.pdf

Aucejo, E. M., & Romano, T. F. (2016). Assessing the effect of school days and absences on test score performance. *Economics of Education Review, 55*, 70–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.08.007

Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The importance of being there: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools. *Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Everyone Graduates Center, Get Schooled*, 1-46. https://coseboc.org/sites/coseboc.org/files/assets/ChronicAbsenteeismReport.pdf

Blodgett, C., & Lanigan, J. D. (2018). The association between adverse childhood experience (ACE) and school success in elementary school children. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *33*(1), 137–146. https://doi.org/ https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000256

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In International Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 3 (2), Oxford: Elsevier. Reprinted in: Gauvain, M. & Cole, M. (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children* (2nd ed., 1993, pp. 37-43). NY: Freeman. https://impactofspecialneeds.weebly.com/uploads/3/4/1/9/3419723/ecologial_models_of_human_development.pdf

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). *Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective*. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 619–647). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10176-018

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Sage.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2007). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 793–828). https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114

Carson, B., & Murphey, C. (1996). *Gifted hands: The Ben Carson story*. Zondervan.

Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades* [Report]. National Center for Children in Poverty. https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf

Christenson, S. L., Storm, K. J., & Pohl, A. J. (2012). *Check & Connect: A comprehensive student engagement intervention: Implementing with fidelity* (3rd ed.). Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. https://ici.umn.edu/products/1

City-Data.com. (2022). *Advanced U.S. city search*. https://www.city-data.com/advanced/search.php#body?fips=0&csize=a&sc=0&sd=0&states=ALL&near=&ps=20&p=0

Cole, J. F. (2011). Interventions to combat the many facets of absenteeism: Action research. *Georgia School Counselors Association Journal, 18*(1), 62-70. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ963130.pdf

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Garrett, A. L. (2008). The "movement" of mixed methods research and the role of educators. *South African Journal of Education, 28*(3), 321-333. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v28n3a176

Cutillo, M. (2013). Poverty's prominent role in absenteeism. *Education Week*, *32*(22), 22-23.

Every Student Succeeds Act. (n.d.). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): A comprehensive guide.* www.everystudentsucceedsact.org

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301. (2015). https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114pub95.pdf

Gee, K. A. (2018). Minding the gaps in absenteeism: Disparities in absenteeism by race/ethnicity, poverty and disability. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 23*(1-2), 204-208. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1428610

Gershenson, S., Jacknowitz, A., & Brannegan, A. (2017). Are student absences worth the worry in U.S. primary schools? *Education Finance and Policy, 12*(2), 137-165. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00207

Gottfried, M. A. (2011). The detrimental effects of missing school: Evidence from urban siblings. *American Journal of Education, 117*(2), 147-182. https://doi.org/10.1086/657886

Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 19*(2), 53-75. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696

Gottfried, M. A., & Gee, K. A. (2017). Identifying the determinants of chronic absenteeism: A bioecological systems approach. *Teachers College Record, 119*(7), 1-34.

Gottfried, M. A., & Hutt, E. L. (2019). Addressing absenteeism: Lessons for policy and practice [Policy brief]. *Policy Analysis for California Education*. https://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/addressing-absenteeism

Greene, J. C., & Caracelli, V. J. (2003). Making paradigmatic sense of mixed methods practice. In A. Tashakkori & C. B. Teddlie (Eds), *Handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research* (pp. 91-110). SAGE.

Guy-Evans, O. (2020). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. *Simply Psychology*. https://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html

Hamilton Project. (2021*). Interactive chronic absence across the United States, 2017-18 School Year*. https://www.hamiltonproject.org/charts/chronic_absence_across_the_united_states_2017_18_school_year

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. (n.d.). *About Check & Connect*. http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/model/default.html

Isaacs, J. B. (2012). *Starting school at a disadvantage: The school readiness of poor children*. Center on Children and Families at Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0319_school_disadvantage_isaacs.pdf

Ivankova, N. (2014). *Mixed methods applications in action research: From methods to community action*. SAGE Publications.

Ivankova, N., & Wingo, N. (2018). Applying mixed methods in action research: Methodological potentials and advantages. *American Behavioral Scientist, 62*(7), 978–997. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218772673

Koller, S. H., Raffaelli, M., & de Morais, N. A. (2020). From theory to methodology: Using ecological engagement to study development in context. *Child Development Perspectives, 14*(3), 157-163. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12378

Lally, P., Van Jaarsveld, C. H., Potts, H. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 40*(6), 998-1009.

Langley, G. J., Moen, R. D., Nolan, K. M., Nolan, T. W., Norman, C. L., & Provost, L. P. (2009). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Lehr, C. A., Sinclair, M. F., & Christenson, S. L. (2004). Addressing student engagement and truancy prevention during the elementary school years: A replication study of the Check & Connect model. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 9*(3), 279-301. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr0903_4

Maynard, B. R., McCrea, K. T., Pigott, T. D., & Kelly, M. S. (2012). Indicated truancy interventions: Effects on school attendance among chronic truant students. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 8*(1), 1-84. https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2012.10

McClure, E. R., Guernsey, L., Clements, D. H., Bales, S. N., Nichols, J., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Levine, M. H. (2017). STEM Starts Early: Grounding Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Education in Early Childhood. In *Joan Ganz Cooney center at sesame workshop*. Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop. 1900 Broadway, New York, NY 10023. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574402.pdf

Mertler, C. A. (Ed.). (2019). *The Wiley handbook of action research in education*. John Wiley & Sons.

Messacar, D., & Oreopoulos, P. (2013). Staying in school: A proposal for raising high-school graduation rates. *Issues in Science and Technology, 29*(2), 55-61.

Moen, R., & Norman, C. (2008). *Evolution of the PDCA Cycle*. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.470.5465&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Morris, A. S., Robinson, L. R., Hays-Grudo, J., Claussen, A. H., Hartwig, S. A., & Treat, A. E. (2017). Targeting parenting in early childhood: A public health approach to improve outcomes for children living in poverty. *Child Development, 88*(2), 388-397. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12743

Morrissey, T. W., Hutchison, L., & Winsler, A. (2014). Family income, school attendance, and academic achievement in elementary school. *Developmental Psychology, 50*(3), 741-753.https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033848

myFutureNC. (2020). *County Explorer*. https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org/county-explorer/

Nauer, K., Mader, N., Robinson, G., & Jacobs, T. (with Cory, B, Moss, J., & Bloodworth, A.). (2014). A better picture of poverty: What chronic absenteeism and risk load reveal about NYC's lowest-income elementary schools. Center for New York City Affairs, The New School. https://www.attendanceworks.org/a-better-picture-of-poverty/

National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES]. (n.d.). *Early childhood longitudinal studies (ECLS) program*. https://nces.ed.gov/ecls/index.asp

NC Early Childhood Foundation. (n.d). *Regular school attendance*. https://buildthefoundation.org/issue/regular-school-attendance/

NC Early Childhood Foundation. (2017). *Attendance counts: Chronic absence in North Carolina* [Issue brief]. https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AttendNCe-Counts-2017.pdf

North Carolina Department of Safety. (2017). *Juvenile justice truancy teams work for NC families*. https://www.ncdps.gov/blog/2017/05/17/juvenile-justice-truancy-teams-work-nc-families

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2022). *School report cards*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/data-reports/school-report-cards

Osborne, M. (2018). *Why do students miss school? Results from a statewide survey on chronic absenteeism*. https://www.ednc.org/why-do-students-miss-school-results-from-a-statewide-survey-on-chronic-absenteeism/

Peek, S. D. (2009). Integrating effective and beneficial interventions to increase student attendance in an elementary school setting. *Georgia School Counselors Association Journal, 16*(1), 9-20. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ871910.pdf

Plano Clark, V. L., & Creswell, J. (2008). *The mixed methods reader*. Sage.

Public Schools First NC. (2020). *A-F school performance grades: Why A-F school performance grades?* https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/fact-sheets/a-f-school-performance-grades/

Public Schools of North Carolina State Board of Education. (2021). *School attendance and student accounting manual 2020 – 2021*. North Carolina Department of Instruction School Business Services School Reporting. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/1258/open

Public School Review. (2022). Welcome to public school review. https://www.publicschoolreview.com/

Ready, D. D. (2010). Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure. *Sociology of Education, 83*(4), 271-286. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0038040710383520

Robinson, C. D., Lee, M. G., Dearing, E., & Rogers, T. (2018). Reducing student absenteeism in the early grades by targeting parental beliefs. *American Educational Research Journal, 55*(6), 1,163-1,192. https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0002831218772274

Romero, M., & Lee, Y. S. (2007). *A national portrait of chronic absenteeism in the early grades.* National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. https://doi.org/10.7916/D89C7650

Rosa, E. M., & Tudge, J. (2013). Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development: Its evolution from ecology to bioecology. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 5*(4), 243-258. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12022

Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research*. ASCD.

Salkind, N. J. (2010). *Encyclopedia of research design* (Vol. 1). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288

Simpkins, S. D., Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2012). Charting the Eccles' expectancy-value model from mothers' beliefs in childhood to youths' activities in adolescence. *Developmental Psychology, 48*(4), 1019-1032. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027468

Sparks, S. (2018, April 25). How many students are chronically absent in your state? Federal data show rates rising. *Education Week*. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2018/04/chronic_absenteeism_states_civil_rights_data_2015_2016.html

Strauss, V., Douglas-Gabriel, D., & Balingit, M. (2018). DeVos seeks cuts from education department to support school choice. *Washington Post, 13*.

Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Sugrue, E. P., Zuel, T., & LaLiberte, T. (2016). The ecological context of chronic school absenteeism in the elementary grades. *Children & Schools, 38*(3), 137-145. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw020

The Psychology Notes Headquarters. (n.d.). *What is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*. https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory/

Tudge, J. R., Payir, A., Merçon-Vargas, E., Cao, H., Liang, Y., Li, J., & O'Brien, L. (2016). Still misused after all these years? A reevaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*(4), 427-445. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12165

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): A new educational law*. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html

U. S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. (2015). *Dropout Prevention intervention report: Check & Connect.* https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/EvidenceSnapshot/78

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-14 Civil rights data collection, a first look: Key data highlights on equity and opportunity gaps in our nation's public schools.* (p. 13). https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

Van Eck, K., Johnson, S. R., Bettencourt, A., & Johnson, S. L. (2017). How school climate relates to chronic absence: A multi–level latent profile analysis. *Journal of School Psychology, 61,* 89-102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.10.001

What Works Clearninghouse. (2015). *Dropout prevention: Check & Connect.* WWW Intervention Report: A summary of findings from a systematic review of evidence. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_checkconnect_050515.pdf

Wolgemuth, J. R., Hicks, T., & Agosto, V. (2017). Unpacking assumptions in research synthesis: A critical construct synthesis approach. *Educational Researcher, 46*(3), 131–139. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17703946

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Angie Jenkins
CC: Robert Reardon
Date: 11/8/2021
Re: UMCIRB 21-001450
Evaluating an Intervention for Improving Elementary Student Attendance

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 11/8/2021. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;

2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);

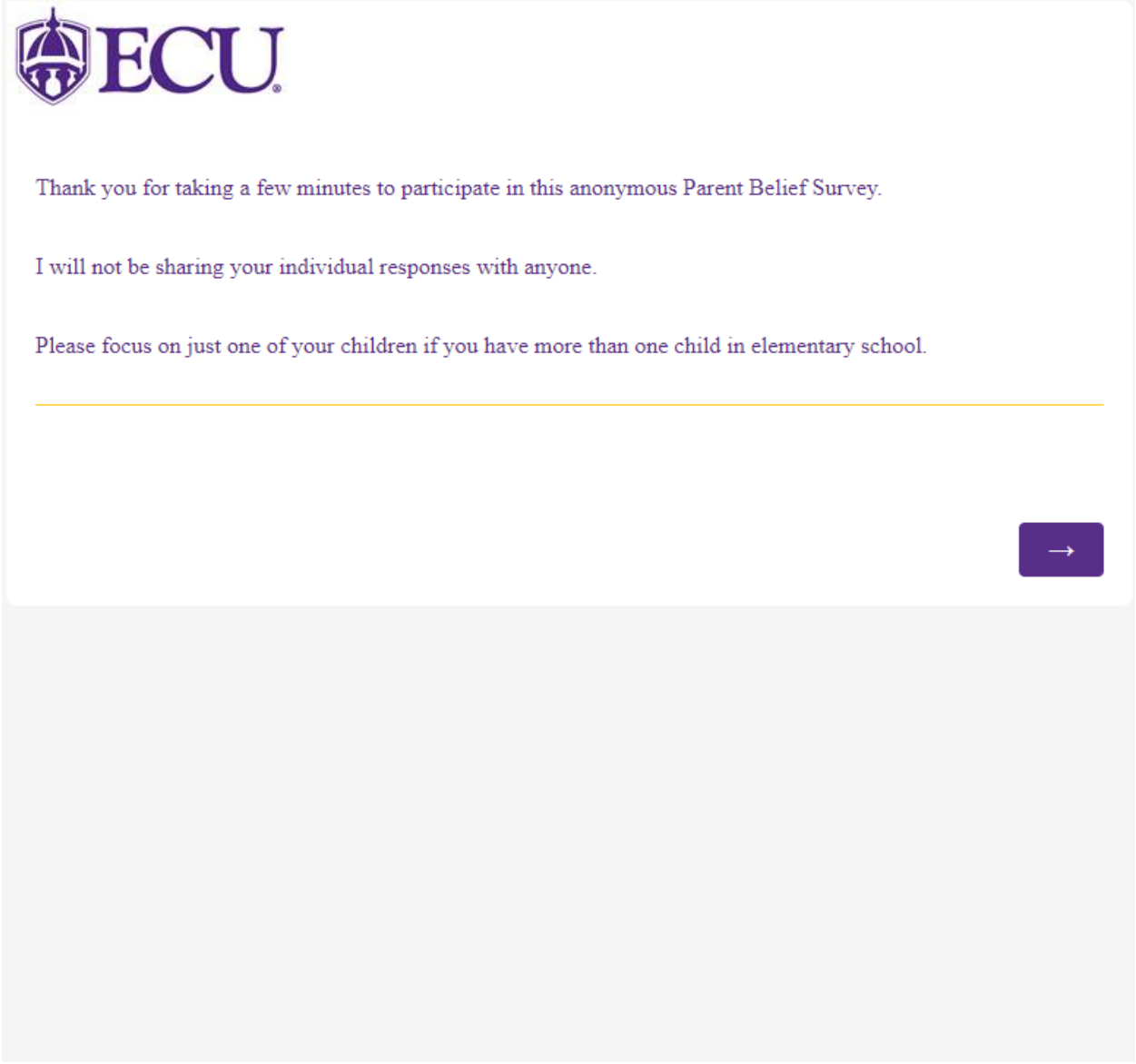
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;

4. Submission of a final report application to the UMICRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and

5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

APPENDIX B: PARENT BELIEF SURVEY – QUALTRICS VERSION

Qualtrics Version



Below are a series of statements. Please respond to the question: **"How strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?"** by checking the appropriate box.

There are no correct answers. It's okay to give me your best guess or estimate if you do not know the exact answer to a question.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q1. My child and I have a warm and loving relationship.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q2. On some days, my child and I disagree about whether he/she should go to school.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q3. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's reading ability.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q4. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's math ability.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q5. Missing a few days of school each month in my child's grade is not a big deal.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q6. Missing a few days of school each month in Grades K – 3 can lead to poor attendance in middle school and high school.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q7. It's okay for my child to be absent for a few days each month, as long as they are excused absences.	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q8. In order to be on track for their next grade, it is important for my child to be in school every single day.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q9. What my child learns in their current grade is critical for them to succeed in high school.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q10. What my child is taught this year is based on rigorous standards set by the state of North Carolina.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q11. Absences during elementary school will not affect whether my child graduates from high school.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q12. I trust that the decisions made by the people at the district office are in the best interests of my child.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q13. The people within my child's school are professionals who are experts in education.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Q14. The people at the district office are professionals who are experts in education.	○	○	○	○	○	○

→

Q15.

Now, if you had to choose one, would you say that learning in your child's grade level this past year was more play-focused, like preschool, or more study-focused, like middle school?

- ○ Preschool
- ○ Middle School
- ○ Don't Know
- ○ Prefer Not to Say

Q16. When it comes to helping your child succeed in school, would you say that you and the others in your home are on your own, or that you have a team of supporters outside of your home who help you?

- ○ I am on my own
- ○ I have a team of supporters
- ○ Both
- ○ Don't Know
- ○ Prefer Not to Say

Q17. Over the course of this school year, did you ever thank someone who helped your child get to school or get home from school with a note or gift to express how grateful you were for their help?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't Know
- ○ Prefer Not to Say

Q18. I am also interested in the relationship parents have with parents of other children. Do you know the name and contact information of a parent of another student in ANY grade at school?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Prefer Not to Say

Q19. Over the course of this school year, have you received calls from the school about your child's absences?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Q20. Over the course of this school year, have you received letters through the mail encouraging your child's attendance in school?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Q21. Did you attend a parent teacher conference with at least one of your child's teachers this fall?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Q22. During this school year, did you have an in-person meeting with the school or district about your child's attendance?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Q23. During this school year, did you receive formal letters through the mail about your child's attendance from the school or school district?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Q24. During this school year, did you receive formal letters about your child's attendance from their school or school district that were sent home directly in your child's folder or backpack?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't Know
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say

Many thanks for your responses so far. I have a few closing questions.

Q25. Please select the option that best applies to the child in which you focused on.

Male

Female

Other

Kindergarten

Grade I

Grade 2

Grade 3

Q26. Please answer the question below as it applies to the
survey by choosing your response from the drop down me

What is the ethnicity of the child whom you focused on in this su

Q27. Please answer the question below by choosing your response from the drop down menu below.

What is your relationship to the child about whom you have been filling in this survey?

Q28. Please answer the question below by choosing your response from the drop down menu below.

What is your ethnicity?

Q29. Please answer the question below by choosing your response from the drop down menu below.

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

→

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

APPENDIX C: PARENT BELIEF SURVEY – PRINTED VERSION

Printed Version

Note: Adapted with permission from Robinson et al. (2018)

Thank you for taking a few minutes to participate in this anonymous Parent Belief Survey.

I will not be sharing your individual responses with anyone.

Please focus on just one of your children if you have more than one child in elementary school. What is your relationship to the child on whom you are focusing?
Below are a series of statements. Please respond to the question: **"How strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?"** by **checking the appropriate box**.
There are no correct answers. It's okay to give me your best guess or estimate if you do not know the exact answer to a question.

	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Don't Know**	**Prefer Not to Say**
Q1. My child and I have a warm and loving relationship.						
Q2. On some days, my child and I disagree about whether he/she should go to school.						
Q3. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's reading ability.						
Q4. Each additional absence has a big effect on my child's math ability.						
Q5. Missing a few days of school each month in my child's grade is not a big deal.						
Q6. Missing a few days of school each month in Grades K – 3 can lead to poor attendance in middle school and high school.						
Q7. It's okay for my child to be absent for a few days each month, as long as they are excused absences.						

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q8. In order to be on track for his/her next grade, it is important for my child to be in school every single day.						
Q9. What my child learns in his/her current grade is critical for him/her to succeed in high school.						
Q10. What my child is taught this year is based on rigorous standards set by the state of North Carolina.						
Q11. Absences during elementary school will not affect whether my child graduates from high school.						
Q12. I trust that the decisions made by the people at the district office are in the best interests of my child.						
Q13. The people within my child's school are professionals who are experts in education.						
Q14. The people at the district county office are professionals who are experts in education.						

	Preschool	Middle School	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q15. Now, if you had to choose one, would you say that learning in your child's grade level this past year was more play-focused, like preschool, or more study-focused, like middle school?				

	I am on my own	I have a team of supporters	Both	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q16. When it comes to helping your child succeed in school, would you say that you and the others in your home are on your own, or that you have a team of supporters outside of your home who help you?					

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q17. Over the course of this school year, did you ever thank someone who helped your child get to school or get home from school with a note or gift to express how grateful you were for their help?				

	Yes	No	Prefer Not to Say
Q18. I am also interested in the relationship parents have with parents of other children. Do you know the name and contact information of a parent of another student in ANY grade at school?			

Q19. Over the course of this school year, have you received calls from the school about your child's absences?	Yes	No	Don't Know	Prefer Not to Say
Q20. Over the course of this school year, have you received letters through the mail encouraging your child's attendance in school?				
Q21. Did you attend a parent teacher conference with at least one of your child's teachers this fall?				
Q22. During this school year, did you have an in-person meeting with the school or district about your child's attendance?				
Q23. During this school year, did you receive formal letters through the mail about your child's attendance from the school or school district?				
Q24. During this school year, did you receive formal letters about your child's attendance from [his/her] school or school district that were sent home directly in your child's folder or backpack?				

Many thanks for your responses so far. I have a few closing questions.

Q25. Please check the boxes that apply to the one child on whom you are focusing.												
Kindergarten			Grade 1			Grade 2			Grade 3		
male	female	other	male	female	other	male	female	other	male	female	other

Q26. What is the ethnicity of the child whom you focused on in this survey.				
American Indian or Alaska Native	**Asian, Asian American**	**Black or African American**	**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander**	**White**
Hispanic or Latino	**Other/Multiple**	**Don't Know**	**Prefer not to say**	

Q27. What is your relationship to the child about whom you have been filling in this survey? (Circle one choice)				
Parent	**Grandparent**	**Aunt or Uncle**	**Step Parent**	**Sibling**
Cousin	**Foster Parent**	**Other**	**Don't Know**	**Prefer not to say**

Q28. What is your ethnicity? (Circle one choice)				
American Indian or Alaska Native	**Asian, Asian American**	**Black or African American**	**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander**	**White**
Hispanic or Latino	**Other/Multiple**	**Don't Know**	**Prefer not to say**	

Q29. What is the highest level of school you have completed? (Circle one choice)				
None, or Grade 1-8	**High School Incomplete (Grades 9-11)**	**High School Graduate (Grade 12 or GED Certificate)**	**Technical, trade, or vocational school AFTER high school**	**Some college, associate degree, no 4-year degree**
College graduate (BS, BA, or other 4-year degree)	**Some post-graduate or professional schooling, no degree (e.g., some graduate school)**	**Post-graduate or professional degree after college (e.g., Master's Degree or PhD; law or medical school)**	**Don't Know**	**Prefer not to say**

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

Evaluating Multi-Modal Intervention for Improving Attendance Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students

Form 1: (For Focus Group)

UMCIRB#: _____

Principal Investigator __Angie Jenkins_____

Purpose
This study is designed to evaluate the outcome of an action research-oriented, multi-modal intervention intended to lessen chronic student absenteeism among students in Grade 1 through Grade 3 within a Title One district in North Carolina. This focus group discussion will take about 60 minutes.

Participants' Rights
I understand that my responses will be kept in the strictest of confidence and will be available only to the researcher. No one will be able to identify me when the results are reported and my name will not appear anywhere in the written report. Please do not share other people's identities or responses from the focus group with others to maintain the anonymity of the participants outside of the focus group. I also understand that I may skip any questions or tasks that I do not wish to answer or complete. I understand that the consent form will be kept separate from the data records to ensure confidentiality. I may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time during the study without penalty. I agree to have my verbal responses tape-recorded and transcribed for further analysis with the understanding that my responses will not be linked to me personally in any way. After the transcription is completed, the tape recordings will be destroyed.

I understand that I am participating in a preliminary study of my own free will.

Consent to Participate
I acknowledge that I am at least eighteen years old, and that I understand my rights as a research participant as outlined above. I acknowledge that my participation is fully voluntary.

You may contact ___Angie Jenkins_____ at _252-231-3509__ any time you have questions about the research.

You may contact the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board at (252) 744-2914 if you have questions about your rights as a research subject or what to do if you are injured.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

Signing this document means that the research study, including the above information, has been described to you orally, and that you voluntarily agree to participate.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Evaluating Multi-Modal Intervention for Improving Attendance Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students

Form 2: (For Research Study)

UMCIRB#: _____

Principal Investigator __Angie Jenkins_____

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Before you agree, the investigator must tell you about (i) the purposes, procedures, and duration of the research; (ii) any procedures which are experimental; (iii) any reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, and benefits of the research; (iv) any potentially beneficial alternative procedures or treatments; (v) how confidentiality will be maintained; and (vi) if identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are collected, a description of whether and how it could be used/shared with others in the future.

Where applicable, the investigator must also tell you about (i) any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs; (ii) the possibility of unforeseeable risks; (iii) circumstances when the investigator may halt your participation; (iv) any added costs to you; (v) what happens if you decide to stop participating; (vi) when you will be told about new findings which may affect your willingness to participate; (vii) how many people will be in the study; (viii) commercial profit from the use of your biospecimens and whether you will share in any commercial profit; (ix) clinically relevant research results that would be disclosed to you; and (x) whether research with biospecimens might include whole genome sequencing.

If you agree to participate, you must be given a signed copy of this document and a written summary of the research.

You may contact ___Angie Jenkins_____ at _252-231-3509__ any time you have questions about the research.

You may contact the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board at (252) 744-2914 if you have questions about your rights as a research subject or what to do if you are injured.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

Signing this document means that the research study, including the above information, has been described to you orally, and that you voluntarily agree to participate.

Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant_____ Date_____

Name of Legal Representative or Guardian _____

Signature of Legal Representative or Guardian _____
Date _____

Name of Interpreter_____

Signature of Interpreter_____ Date_____

Name of Person Who Obtained Consent_____

Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent _____
Date_____

Name of Witness_____

Signature of Witness_____ Date_____

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

Title of study: Evaluating Multi-Modal Intervention for Improving Attendance Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students

Date & Time of Focus Group: Location:

Conducted by: Angie Jenkins

Introduction:

I deeply appreciate your participation in this focus group this evening. My name is Angie Jenkins and I am conducting this focus group on behalf of the principal to share with you the results of the school-wide survey of parent opinion you may have contributed to and to help me further understand issues related to students who often miss school.

I will be recording our conversation and taking notes to make sure I am capturing the finer points of our discussion. I will keep whatever you share in this session confidential, but I cannot control how other members of this focus group might share the contents of our discussion with a wider audience after we have finished.

Prompts:

1. Here is what I found from my analysis of the data so far.
2. What is your perspective on the importance of elementary students attending school every day?
3. To what degree is it more important for middle school or high school students to attend every day than elementary students?
4. What are some ways do you think that missing school impacts elementary students?
5. What do you think are the major reasons that kids miss school?

6. In what ways do you believe that this school provides the children who attend it with the best education possible?
7. How would you rate your satisfaction with the school's ability to meet the needs of the children who attend it (Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Not Sure, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied)?

APPENDIX F: IMPACT/OUTCOME EVALUATION

Chronic Absenteeism Intervention Impact Survey

This survey is part of a research study being undertaken by Angie Jenkins, an ECU doctoral student at East Carolina University with the cooperation of the school district. I am collecting these survey results because I want to understand your experience during this intervention.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. If you choose to take part, you may change your mind and stop the survey at any time. I am interested in your perceptions regarding the impact of the intervention to increase attendance among chronical absent students within the school.

This survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Information from this survey will greatly help my understanding of the intervention from your perspective. **Thank you for your participation!**

Title of Study: Evaluating Multi-Modal Intervention for Improving Attendance Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students

I am a:
Classroom teacher ☐
Check & Connect Mentor ☐
Social worker ☐
Staff Member ☐
Principal ☐

1) **Based upon your observation, to what extent would you rate the effectiveness of the intervention to:**

   a. **Improve the students' willingness to attend school regularly.**

   O Very effective

   O Somewhat effective

   O Not effective

   b. **Reduce the number of days that students were absent from school.**

   O Very effective

   O Somewhat effective

   O Not effective

c. Encourage the students to regularly meet and check in with their Check & Connect partner.

O Very effective

O Somewhat effective

O Not effective

d. Encourage the students' participation and engagement in the classroom.

O Very effective

O Somewhat effective

O Not effective

e. Increasing parent engagement in their student's academic success (i.e. helping with homework, contacting the teachers).

O Very effective

O Somewhat effective

O Not effective

f. Improving parents' response to communication from the school (i.e., parent/teacher meetings, follow-up communication from teachers, etc.)

O Very effective

O Somewhat effective

O Not effective

2) Based upon your observation, what part of the intervention do you feel was most effective? Check all that apply.

O Students daily check in with their Check & Connect accountability partner.

O Rewards for student regular attendance.

O Mailers to parents about the importance of education.

O Phone communication and feedback with parents.

Please write in any suggestions you would like to make about how to refine this intervention.