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Understanding the Experiences of Secondary Students Identified as In-School Truant and Their Perceived Contributing Factors to Truancy: When and What Caused the Disconnection

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Understanding the Experiences of Secondary Students Identified as In-School Truant and Their
Perceived Contributing Factors to Truancy: When and What Caused the Disconnection

by

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M.Ed. Ed.S. Moorhead State University Moorhead

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Benny, and our son, Ari. Thank you for your support over the past few years as this was a journey for all of us. Ari, may you always seek opportunities to learn about yourself and the world around you. I love you always and forever. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my Mom, who I lost at the age of seventeen. While life stacked the cards against you, your love for me was never questioned. I wish you could see me today as I know you would be proud. Thank you for believing in me.

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Thank you, participants, for agreeing to participate in this study. You are students I had the privilege of working with each day as you navigated the complexities of adolescence. You are strong, thoughtful, and creative students with immense potential to change the world. I believe in you and will be rooting for you.

On a lighter note, I would like to thank Drekker Brewing as you provided the perfect space to reflect, study, and write on the second floor with a table overlooking everything. This was a space I utilized most Sundays while my son napped.

Abstract

A strong correlation exists between school attendance and positive school outcomes such as increased graduation rates, stronger sense of belonging, and a higher grade-point average (Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Therefore, school administrators implement strategies that foster positive attendance behavior for students. Attendance data is quantitative in nature and, while quantitative data is needed for decisions related to policy and best practices, qualitative data may better identify root causes of truancy behavior. This study's purpose was to identify perceived contributing factors that resulted in participants having high rates of in-school truancy, or going to school and skipping classes, compared to their peers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven high school students to understand their lived experiences throughout their educational career that led to their truancy behavior in high school. Attendance data were analyzed to identify participants with the highest rates of in-school truancy during a particular semester. Legal guardians of participants signed an informed consent letter and then participants provided assent prior to beginning the study. The Hemmingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2005) is the guiding theoretical framework and guided interview questions. Participants remained anonymous by using pseudonyms and redacting identifying information. Data was analyzed with both deductive and inductive coding. Six major themes were identified: four connecting to the theoretical framework and two as emerging issues. These provide insights to educators as they focus resources to support positive experiences for students and ultimately increase school belonging and attendance rates.

Keywords: Secondary education, public education, attendance, truancy, belonging, school connectedness, adolescent; contributing factors

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Approximately 15 percent of K-12 students in the United States are chronically absent (Hamlin, 2021), which places these students at higher risk of failing more courses, feeling a decrease in school-connectedness, and increases their risk of dropping out compared to their same-aged peers (Hamlin, 2021; Daily et al., 2020). Understanding what factors prevent a student from attending class is important when selecting and implementing effective strategies to support attendance. One indicator of in-school attendance may be the level of belonging, or connectedness, a student feels to their school (Daily et al., 2020; Duke, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines school connectedness as “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (2009, p. 3).

Students who have strong relationships with their teachers and have positive peer relations feel more connected to their school community and are more likely to achieve positive school outcomes compared to their peers who do not have a strong relationship with their school community (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Baskerville, 2021). There can be several factors that impact a student’s ability or choice to attend school. “In a study of adolescents with chronic absenteeism, a relationship was found between attendance problems and school climate variables including order and discipline, sharing of resources, relationships between students, relationships between students and teachers, and parental involvement” (Hendron & Kearney, 2016, cited by Young, Sollose, & Carey, 2020, p. 132).

Attendance data are typically quantitative in nature. However, as Young, Sollose, and Carey (2020) identified, many variables can cause chronic absenteeism with some variables

being better understood with a qualitative perspective. Understanding variables such as relationships with peers, connections to teachers, and feelings of school belonging are ecological factors (Karcher, 2005) that, when explored and understood, can shed meaningful insights into why a student is chronically absent from school. The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2005) provided the framework during the semi-structured interviews in this study with a focus on ecological factors that impact an adolescent's connectedness. Additionally, the interview process permitted participants to provide insights on how they experienced the phenomenon through their own lenses. This study provides school leaders with important insights to reshape current practices and identify policies that negatively impact feelings of belongingness and attendance for students.

Need for the Study

Attendance data tends to be quantitative and overlooks personal experiences that explain the *why* behind the attendance data. School leaders must understand the function of student behavior before effectively addressing the outcomes of student behavior. In simpler terms, a school leader should have a strong understanding of what barriers are preventing a student from successfully attending school and classes each day. Truancy, for the participants in this study, is defined as “being absent from one or more classes without the consent of parents/guardians and or school officials” (Fargo Public Schools, 2022, p. 2). An absence is coded as truant if a student misses school without an approved excuse from a parent, guardian, or educator. Another form of truancy occurs when a student attends school but skips class. This type of attendance code is called an in-school truant. This study focused on those students who come to school but do not attend every class each day. The purpose of studying in-school truant behavior instead of regular truant is intentional.

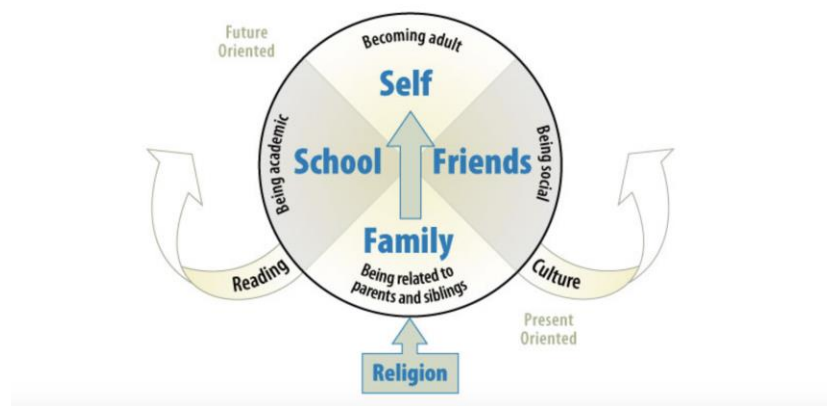
By studying in-school truant behavior, the researcher explored what factors led a student to not attend class despite having access to the class. Literature surrounding school attendance is expansive and has been published for decades (Allensworth, 2007; Cockrell, 1923; F.N.F., 1913; Lindsay, 1982; Marshall, 1950). However, public schools continue to evolve, adapting to changing student needs and community demands. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted schools and students in ways that do not yet have substantial literature available. This study filled a gap in the literature by studying how current secondary in-school truant students have experienced school belonging and attendance, particularly in a post-COVID-19 world.

Theoretical Framework

Adolescent Connectedness Theory is the theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, Karcher (2002) developed a model to measure adolescent connectedness, which is called The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness. This model identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. Figure 1 provides a graphical summary of this model.

Figure 1

The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness Model



The theory draws from Nakkula and Selman's hermeneutical idea that "human being" is best understood as "reflecting youths' interpretations of connectedness to the world over time" (Karcher, 2005, p. 5). Adolescent Connectedness Theory would urge school leaders to understand how adolescents experience a phenomenon through their own mental models and unique lived experiences when making educational decisions. The researcher for this study believes that adolescent connectedness is at the core of most adolescent behaviors. Adolescents need a strong connection to friends, school, family, and themselves to build the necessary skills to navigate school and the community.

Purpose of the Study

Addressing attendance patterns in the high school environment may feel like an impossible task for principals due to the habits students have already established over the years. An added layer of complexity is that students may not have access to alternative educational settings until a certain age, despite the difficulties students experience at the traditional, comprehensive high school. Educational settings that may serve these students better include alternative education or a General Education Development (GED) program. North Dakota, for example, requires children to attend the traditional, comprehensive high school until the age of sixteen (N.D.C.C. § 15.1-20-01). School administrators sometimes feel like the system may have an added barrier for a student because, even if a student does not want to attend traditional, comprehensive high school, they are required to attend until the age of sixteen due to North Dakota law. This does not change despite how unsuccessful or how challenging the traditional, comprehensive school setting may be for the student. Finally, at the age of sixteen, the student has access to other options like attending an alternative education program, obtaining a GED, or dropping out.

The purpose of this study was to interview high school students progressing towards these alternative options per school indicators, such as low in-school attendance rates, to see what earlier incident(s) or experiences directly impacted their ability or intent to graduate with a high school diploma in the traditional, comprehensive setting. These insights give school and district leaders insights on what possible intervention measures can look like in the high school setting and what events can harm a student during their earlier years in public school systems.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy?

Research Design

Positive youth development entails six components, termed the Six C's, which are contribution, competence, confidence, caring, character, and connection (Skek et al., 2019). This qualitative study focused on connection, which is also referred to as connectedness. A sense of connectedness is defined as 'a sense of belonging, feelings of mutual support, acceptance, safety, respect, engagement, and inclusion to certain contexts' (Aydin and Oztütüncü, 2001; Dornbusch et al., 2001, cited by Too et al., 2022, p. 2.; Resnick et al., 1997; Unger et al., 2000). Adolescents with higher levels of social connectedness report an overall higher state of well-being in the areas of life satisfaction, aspiration, confidence, and positive affect (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012).

The design of this study closely follows that of Karcher and Lee's (2005) work, *The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness*, which identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. A phenomenological research design is used because "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several

individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as this provided an opportunity to gather deep and meaningful insights as opposed to more numerical results. Interview questions were designed with the framework provided by Karcher and Lee’s measure of adolescent development so all four major domains of adolescent connectedness were explored. A phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews provided the framework necessary to identify shared experiences amongst study participants and identify correlations between feelings of school connectedness and in-school attendance rates.

Significance of the Study

Literature is lacking regarding how students perceive school connectedness and school attendance in a post-COVID world. The results from this study will be meaningful for school leaders across the country who focus on increasing in-school attendance rates for students. Using both deductive and inductive coding, this study provided a holistic view of how students experience the phenomenon of school belonging. Inductive coding allowed the researcher to collect data before deciding “what the important questions are to consider” (Fraenkel et al., 2019, p. 383). Deductive coding used predetermined questions, developed by using Karcher and Lee’s (2005) work, *The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness*, to maintain validity with the theoretical framework of adolescent connectedness. School leaders will be able to utilize the data analyzed with both coding approaches to gain a rich understanding of how students experience school belonging and attendance.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

An assumption in this study was the belief that the participants told the truth during the interviews. Even if a student was telling the truth to the best of their ability, the interview questions required recollection of a previous event that could have been misconstrued during the interview. Another assumption is that each participant had a complete and accurate understanding of what the researcher was asking of them. The researcher was intentional to “focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Another assumption is that the researcher was effective in gathering data. With an epistemological approach of subjectivism, students explained their experiences through narratives with the goal “to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” allowing participants to “construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Even though the interview questions were reviewed and approved by a dissertation committee, this study assumed that the study participants, who were adolescents, understood what each question was asking of them.

A limitation of this study was the lack of multiple interviews with the same participants over time. These one-time interviews captured a snapshot into a participant’s life at that moment in time. However, if interviews were to be conducted more than once, over a period of time, participants may recall additional experiences that may impact the overall findings of the study. Participants were also students enrolled at a single high school that may not be reflective of other high schools across the United States based on size and location.

A limitation of this study was bias of the researcher. The researcher had a personal connection with each study participant due to the professional role of being a school

administrator. This role may have led the researcher to interpret interview responses differently compared to a researcher who does not know the participants or work as closely with the phenomenon that was studied. Another limitation of this study is the researcher deciding not to analyze data through the lens of student demographics. The researcher decided to analyze data from the perspective of school belonging and the impact on attendance behavior from a general lens without considering a student's demographic indicators such as race, socioeconomic status, or gender. Future studies could analyze data through the lens of student demographics to discern different implications for different demographic groups.

The phenomena of school connectedness, adolescent connectedness, and in-school attendance are each complex and could be explored from various angles. A delimitation of this study was the depth of data collection and analysis for each of these areas. While all three areas are explored and analyzed, future research could explore each individual phenomenon significantly deeper.

Summary

Due to the concerns that occur when a student is chronically absent from school, school leaders are tasked with implementing strategies to help students improve their attendance data. Feeling a strong sense of school connectedness is one protective factor for students and is one consideration for school administrators. However, with attendance data typically being quantitative in nature, important qualitative data may be overlooked when considering what types of interventions should be put into place for students. This study interviewed several high school students identified as chronically absent to gain a deep understanding of how they have experienced school connectedness during their years as a student and how those experiences have impacted their ability or desire to attend classes in high school. Utilizing both inductive and

deductive coding provided insights on how students have experienced school connectedness, purely from the students' perspective. By utilizing this study design, students had the opportunity to educate school leaders on their experiences that may not mirror the current assumptions of school leaders implementing attendance strategies.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study is to explore the factors a student experiences during their public primary and secondary education that ultimately leads to school disconnectedness or school dissatisfaction. At the high school level, commonly grades 9-12, there is a strong correlation between school attendance and positive school outcomes such as increased graduation rates, a stronger sense of belonging, and a higher grade point average (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020). Therefore, school administrators implement strategies and practices to foster positive attendance behavior for all students. However, much of the data related to school attendance is quantitative. While quantitative data is significant and critical for decisions around policy and best practices, qualitative data can better explain the actual reason or root causes of attendance behavior. This study interviews several high school students about their public education experience, seeking to understand what experiences or incidents along the way led to them feeling like attending school would not result in the same positive outcomes as their peers (Davies & Lee, 2006). The Hemmingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2005) is the guiding theoretical framework for this study, and is reviewed at the end of this chapter. This literature review provides a foundation for understanding factors that impact school connectedness for secondary students.

Sources for this literature review were found primarily through online research databases such as Education Research Complete – Ebsco, ERIC – Ebsco, and Google Scholar. Common search terms included: *in-school attendance*, *secondary school*, *connectedness*, and *truancy*.

Theoretical Orientation

Positive youth development entails six components, termed the 6 C's, which are contribution, competence, confidence, caring, character, and connection (Skek et al., 2019). This

qualitative study focused on connection, which is also referred to as connectedness. A sense of connectedness is defined as “a sense of belonging, feelings of mutual support, acceptance, safety, respect, engagement, and inclusion to certain contexts” (Aydin and Oztütüncü, 2001; Dornbusch et al., 2001, cited by Too et al., 2022, p. 2; Resnick et al., 1997; Unger et al., 2000). Adolescents with higher levels of social connectedness report an overall higher state of well-being in the areas of life satisfaction, aspiration, confidence, and positive affect (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012).

The *Adolescent Connectedness Theory* is the theoretical framework for this study. Being built initially on the interpretive-hermeneutic framework, the theory was guided by developmental principles, ecological structures, and prevention research. The theory “draws from Nakkula and Selman’s hermeneutical idea that ‘human being’ is best understood as reflecting youths’ interpretations of connectedness to the world over time” (Karcher, 2005, p. 5). The model also pulls from Baumeister & Leary’s (1996) belongingness hypothesis to make it appropriate for adolescents. Additionally, The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness is “structured by Jessor’s distinction between conventional and unconventional worlds in the ecology of adolescents” (p. 5). The measure assesses how adolescents experience important ecological worlds such as parents, school, peers, and self. The design of this study closely followed that of Karcher and Lee’s (2005) work, The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness, which identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self.

The measure is quantitative as research participants respond to scaling questions, which researchers analyze to determine a participant’s level of belonging. Since this study was qualitative, the measure provided by The Hemmingway Measure was not implemented. Rather, the Adolescent Connectedness Theory, along with components addressed by The Hemmingway

Measure, created the foundational questions used during the semi-structured interviews, which gathered deep insight and meaning from study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methodology

With the guidance of Creswell (2013) and Morse (1995), seven participants were interviewed for this phenomenological study. Each of the seven interviews covered the same eight primary questions while about half of the interviews required subsequent questions to elicit deep and meaningful insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an explanatory study, the researcher gathered enough data to “explain the connection between phenomena or variables” and provide the *why* behind a social phenomenon that other study types cannot provide (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022, p. 143). Thematic interpretation was the method for analyzing and understanding data collected through student interviews to identify patterns and themes. Inductive coding initiates the data analysis process without predetermined codes, allowing the participant narrative to drive the discovery of themes and codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both deductive and inductive coding were used.

Literature Review

School administrators are concerned with a wide range of issues surrounding student wellness, student achievement, and staff retention. High school administrators, specifically, must implement strategies to improve in-school attendance as research indicates approximately 15% of students in the United States are chronically absent (Hamlin, 2021). Chronically absent students are more likely to fail courses, have a decrease in school-connectedness, and have an increased risk of dropping out compared to their same-aged peers (Hamlin, 2021; Daily et al., 2020).

School administrators are tasked with implementing strategies to increase in-school attendance rates. Understanding what factors prevent a student from attending class is important for effective implementation of attendance strategies. One indicator of in-school attendance may be the level of belonging a student feels at school (Daily et al., 2020; Duke, 2020). Dr. Michael J. Karcher, creator of The Hemmingway instrument to measure connectedness, defines connectedness as “adolescents’ ability to satisfy their need to belong through their multiple opportunities for connectedness with people and places” (Karcher, 2005, p. 5). Churchill et al. (2021) identified a correlation between student connectedness to advisors and the impact these relationships had on school outcomes such as tardiness, absences, and academic achievement. By increasing a student’s feelings of belonging at school, in-school attendance may also increase. North Dakota Century Code (N.D.C.C., 2018) mandates a child attend a public school for the full duration of each school year, requiring school administrators to ensure students are attending school. Devenney and O’Toole (2021) show that more than a biological framework or medical diagnoses, adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and poverty are the biggest contributors to school refusal.

Literature supports a positive correlation between school attendance and academic and social-emotional outcomes (Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020). The question for any secondary administrator, though, is how can school staff positively influence a student’s attendance in school and class. Literature provides insights on current attendance trends in relation to school connectedness and potential barriers to in-school attendance.

School Connectedness

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) defines school connectedness as “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as

individuals” (p. 3). Belonging and fitting in is a crucial component in student development (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022) “feelings of being wanted and accepted are key dynamics of experiencing mattering” (Baskerville, 2021, p. 841) or feelings of belongingness. For a student to feel like they matter, they need to feel that the other individual, such as peer or school adult, cares enough about them to ask how they can help the student (2021). Students who feel a sense of connectedness to their peers and teachers have higher motivation and engagement at school, leading to increased attendance rates (Dannow et al., 2020). School leaders should understand that although truancy is a concern for schools, truancy is not necessarily a problem for the student.

School Community

Students who have strong relationships with their teachers and have positive peer relations feel more connected to their school community and are more likely to achieve positive school outcomes compared to their peers who do not have a strong relationship with their school community (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Baskerville, 2021). However, having only a “few friendships in class, lack of social support from classmates, and experience of classmates growing apart are indicators of children’s lack of a sense of belonging to the class and connectedness to school” (Dannow et al., 2020, p. 33).

Student Engagement

Participation in extracurricular activities is beneficial for all groups of adolescents and predicts several indicators of academic, psychological, and behavioral adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). “Extracurricular activities expose students to learning opportunities different from their classroom learning environments, potentially shifting their levels of school engagement” (Gorski, 2021, p. 248). “There are certain features of extracurricular activities that drive whether

and how those activities contribute to students' academic success" (p. 248) and being involved in extracurricular activities can be transformative for a student's sense of belonging and attitudes towards learning.

School Attendance

"Attendance is the most important determinant of passing classes and graduating. Even a week of absence per semester substantially increases the likelihood of failing a class" (Allensworth & Easton, 2007, p. 41). Understanding why a student withdraws from school may shed insights on "understand[ing] how school might be more significant in the lives of all young people" (Davies & Lee, 2006, p. 208). State laws have different requirements for student attendance. North Dakota Century Code, specifically, requires children to attend traditional, comprehensive high school until the age of sixteen (N.D.C.C. § 15.1-20-01). School districts and states commonly define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of a school year for any reason (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gennetian et al., 2018).

Daily et al. (2020) surveyed middle and high school students ($n = 6,839$) in West Virginia about school absences, with only two choices presented: absent due to "illness" or absent due to "skipping" (p. 685). Results indicate that only 6% of middle school students missed school due to intentional skipping meanwhile 15% of high school students missed school due to skipping. Additionally, the negative effects of missing school were more pronounced when students missed school due to skipping versus illness. This is alarming and indicates the importance of improving in-school attendance for the students who choose to skip versus students who are out for illness.

Baskerville (2021) introduces a concept called "wagging" to explain the phenomenon of truancy. "Wagging-in-class was the first stage in the process of truancy; although participants

were attending class, they were progressively detaching from their teachers, peers and from learning” (p. 841). Additionally, “being with outside-class friends offered an alternative to previous stressful classroom experiences; here, peer relationships were positive, mindful of others’ feelings, respectful, protective, and inclusive. The participants were included and accepted for who they were” (p. 842). Wagging provides an understanding of the function and behavior of *why* a student may be in school but not attending classes. Once a student begins to skip class, the choice to skip class can become more frequent for a student. Once a student becomes chronically absent for one year, they are often chronically absent for multiple years (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Barriers to Attendance

Balfanz & Byrnes (2012) divide student absences into three broad categories: 1) Students who cannot attend due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, etc.; 2) students who will not attend school due to bullying, harassment, feeling unsafe, etc.; and 3) “students who do not attend school because they, or their parents, do not value them being there, they have something else they’d rather do, or nothing is stopping them from skipping school” (p. 7). There can be several factors that impact a student’s ability or choice to attend school. In a study of adolescents with chronic absenteeism, a relationship was found between “attendance problems and school climate variables including order and discipline, sharing of resources, relationships between students, relationships between students and teachers, and parental involvement” (Hendron & Kearney, 2016, cited by Young, Sollose, & Carey, 2020, p. 132). There are five factors common amongst students identified as chronically absent: socio-economic status, mental health, identified disability, school safety, and parent perceptions. These factors are described in the remainder of this chapter.

Socio-Economic Status

Low-income students, typically those who qualify for free-or-reduced lunch (FRL) or free school meals (FSM), experience increased rates of chronic absenteeism, up to four times more likely, compared to their non-low-income peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2015, cited by Gennetian et al., 2018, p. 20). “Adolescents from more deprived areas, living in socially rented housing, coming from households with lower levels of parental education and social class, and registered for FSM were more frequently absent from school than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds” (Klein et al., 2020, p. 3).

Churchill et al. (2021) conducted a study of two schools in Rhode Island to determine how student connections within the school impact tardiness, absences, disciplinary referrals, and failed courses. The authors identified a correlation between student connectedness to advisors and the impact these relationships had on school outcomes such as tardiness, absences, and academic achievement. Furthermore, the authors analyzed outcomes through the lens of students with lower socioeconomic status and academic support plans such as an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Section 504 accommodations. Data indicated lower levels of support correlated to higher rates of disciplinary referrals and failed courses. Data also indicated students qualifying for FRL are 1.57 times more likely to drop-out compared to non-FRL peers.

Students who qualify for FRL may also experience transportation barriers, preventing access to attending school if transportation issues arise. When considering transportation needs, a school’s start time can have an impact on a student’s ability to attend school. “Absences increase after schools advance their start time. This suggests that it is difficult for students and families to adjust to an earlier schedule—that is, students are more likely to miss school if the bus is arriving

earlier or if families need to drop their child off at school earlier” (Bastian & Fuller, 2023, p. 197)

Income volatility, or the instability of a family’s income, also has an impact on attendance rates. “For 7th graders, high income volatility is also associated with a decrease in attendance rates, relative to stable income” (Gennetian et al., 2018, p. 24). “Among 4th, 7th, and 9th graders in these families, higher income was associated with better attendance, a finding that is consistent with prior research. A new finding from this study, however, is that having low-income level with high income volatility is associated with lower attendance rates among 4th and 7th graders, relative to having low-income with stable or moderate-income volatility” (Gennetian et al., 2018, p. 27).

Mental Health

School leaders must recognize barriers to a student’s attendance and understand that “schools with higher value-added to social-emotional development, students are more likely to go on to graduate high school and enroll in a four-year college” (Jackson et al., 2021, p. 69). Duke (2020) explored how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impacted school attendance and academic achievement. This was a large-scale study completed in Minnesota and included 81,885 students in grades 9 and 11 with an average age of 15.5 years. A multivariate logistic regression was conducted to identify whether a correlation of ACEs and outcomes existed after demographic and individual covariates were adjusted. Results are consistent with what the literature suggests in terms of how strongly Adverse Childhood Experiences negatively impact student outcomes.

Multiple types of ACEs are significantly associated with higher odds of students having no plan for high school graduation and no other plan for future skill development,

frequent unexcused absences, and below average academic achievement, all outcomes representing threats to future socioeconomic mobility and health. (Duke, 2020, p. 627)

These findings are important for school administrators as they further confirm the importance of viewing student behavior, attendance, and outcomes through a trauma-informed lens. North Dakota Century Code requires trauma training for educators, which is implemented within Fargo Public Schools. By implementing trauma-informed practices, and having an increased understanding of trauma, students will feel safer at school and increase their in-school attendance rates (Hamlin, 2021).

In addition to childhood trauma, anxiety disorders are risk factors for school absenteeism (Dannow et al., 2020). The researchers (2020) found a consistent theme in their research where students felt a “fear of negative evaluation from peers,” which closely resembled the description of social anxiety symptoms (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This finding is not surprising given that all children displayed anxiety-related school absenteeism. Students experiencing mental health difficulties may also withdraw themselves from the school environment as the student views self-withdrawal as a solution to a problem (Davies & Lee, 2006). These students offer an important critique to the school system and solve their personal problems by choosing to refuse engagement. Staff members might initially view this behavior as noncompliant and submit an office referral, but Davies and Lee’s research suggest viewing behavior of disengagement as an indicator of a problem the student does not know how else to solve. Instead of an initial office referral or exclusionary practices, educators must attempt to build a relationship with these students as “human connection and belonging (i.e., emotional engagement) are key in supporting students from dropping out” (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022, p. 108).

Disability

Research correlating a student's identified disability as documented with a school support plan (e.g. Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Accommodation Plan) and in-school attendance data is limited. Churchill et al. (2021) conducted a study in which the results did not prove that qualification for an academic support plan would lead to higher odds of drop-out. However, when exploring absenteeism, students with disabilities are more likely to miss school compared to their non-disabled peers, with an estimate of 65% more likely to be chronically absent (Gottfried et al., 2019). Students with emotional disturbances (ED) were found to be the most chronically absent subgroup of students with disabilities, with almost half of ED students being chronically absent (2019). Melvin et al. (2023) found that 29.3% of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) "were absent for at least 10% of this time" (p. 380). This means 29.3% of ID students are chronically absent due to missing at least 10% of school days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gennetian et al., 2018), which is nearly double the percentage of students who skipped school without the identification of special education (Daily et al., 2020). Furthermore, "absence[s] was higher for students attending mainstream versus special schools but did not differ by student gender, school setting (metropolitan vs. rural), school size or school socio-economic status" (Melvin et al., 2023, p. 381).

Students with disabilities taking mostly general education classes were less likely to be chronically absent than those taking mostly special education classes (2019). Specifically, students who were in general education classrooms for less than 40% of their day experienced higher rates of absenteeism compared to their peers who accessed general education classrooms for more than 40% of their day (Anderson, 2021).

School Safety

Cuellar et al. (2021) explored how school climate can impact the effects of student victimization on academic performance. The study separated school safety, particularly around gun violence, from student victimization in the context of fighting, theft, vandalism, bullying, hate crimes, and gang violence. Three research questions were explored: 1) victimization predictors; 2) correlation to student victimization and school outcomes; and 3) how school climate impacted the correlation between victimization and outcomes. An area of concern was that Black and Hispanic students were at a higher risk of failing courses and feeling unsafe at school. Results indicated students with low engagement had higher GPAs when experiences of victimization occurred compared to peers with high engagement. The authors believe this is due to the less engaged students' ability to discount negative experiences.

When a student does not feel safe or has a low sense of belonging in class, they may seek positive peer interactions outside of class that feel welcoming, fun, and overall contribute to them feeling better about themselves (Baskerville, 2021). “Enhanced school safety, including reduced bullying and other forms of violence, creates an environment more conducive to student well-being, academic achievement, competency development, and willingness to attend and remain in school” (Kingston et al., 2018, cited by Bacon & Kearney, 2020, p. 2). Schools have a tricky balance between compliance to create a safe environment and autonomy where students can associate with friends and receive respectful treatment (Davies & Lee, 2006). By increasing the expectation for compliance without increasing the level of support and welcomeness, students may choose to skip class to receive positive support from peers elsewhere.

Parent Perceptions

Inclusion of parents and/or guardians in a student's academic journey is an important component in public schools "because of the strong loyalty between children and their parents and the allegiance they show to their parents' perspectives on education, work, and aspirations" (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022, p. 105). "Families described positive student-teacher relationships as when the teacher acknowledged the child and adjusted the demands to the child's current needs" (Dannow et al., p. 33).

However, not all relationships between a family and the school are positive. Educators and administrators sometimes make decisions that parents do not understand or support. This is problematic for phenomena such as truancy or bullying as each stakeholder has their own perception of the underlying root cause. "Parents perceived the main cause of truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers and peer pressure – within-school factors. Teachers, on the other hand, believe that parental attitudes and home environments are more influential" (Davies & Lee, 2006, p. 205).

Summary

Students who are chronically absent, regardless of the reason, are more likely to experience negative school outcomes such as decreased feelings of connectedness, lower grade point averages, and higher rates of dropping out compared to their non-chronically absent peers. There are many reasons that lead to a student being chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism can be an outcome of external factors such as family instability, parent perceptions, or low socio-economic status (Gennetian et al., 2018; Hendron & Kearney, 2016, cited by Young et al., 2020, p. 132). Chronic absenteeism can be a result of internal factors such as low feelings of connectedness, conflict with peers or teachers, or personal choice to engage in a preferred

activity that is not within the classroom (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Baskerville, 2021; Dannow et al., 2020).

Regardless of why a student is chronically absent, school administrators must work to increase a student's feelings of school connectedness by creating a safe, supportive and welcoming environment that will hopefully, overtime, repair any harm the student has experienced related to school prior to becoming chronically absent. While qualitative research (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020) continues to support the need for students to attend school, there is a lack of qualitative data related to internal factors that led to a student becoming chronically absent.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling as the researcher had direct access to many potential study participants, due to the researcher's employment, and hand-picked participants based on judgment (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022). The target population for this study was high school students identified as being chronically absent, meaning they missed at least ten percent of school days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gennetian et al., 2018) and selected by the researcher, who was an administrator within the school. With the guidance of Creswell (2013) and Morse (1995), seven participants were interviewed for this phenomenological study.

The design of this study closely followed that of Karcher and Lee's (2005) work, The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness, which identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, family, and self. The measure is quantitative as research participants respond to scaling questions, which researchers analyze to determine a participant's level of belongingness. Since this study was qualitative, Hemmingway Measure was not implemented. Rather, the Adolescent Connectedness Theory, along with components addressed by The Hemmingway Measure, created the foundational questions used during the

semi-structured interviews, which gathered deep insight and meaning from study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

A strong correlation exists between school attendance and positive school outcomes such as increased graduation rates, a stronger sense of belonging, and a higher grade-point average (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020). Therefore, school administrators implement strategies and practices to foster positive attendance behavior for all students as approximately 15% of students in the United States are chronically absent (Hamlin, 2021). Chronically absent students are more likely to fail courses, have a decrease in school-connectedness, and an increased risk of dropping out compared to their same-aged peers (Hamlin, 2021; Daily et al., 2020). While there are many barriers to a student attending school, such as family income, family values towards education, or an identified disability, there could also be a specific event(s) that occurred prior to high school that shifted their mindset where they began to believe their time was better spent somewhere other than in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding what factors prevent a student from attending class is important for the effective implementation of attendance strategies. One indicator of in-school attendance may be the level of belonging a student feels to their school (Daily et al., 2020; Duke, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) defines school connectedness as “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 3). School leaders should understand that although truancy is a concern for schools, truancy is not necessarily a problem for the student (Davies & Lee, 2006).

Balfanz & Byrnes (2012) divide student absences into three broad categories: Students who cannot attend due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, etc., students who will not attend school due to bullying, harassment, feeling unsafe, etc., and “students who do not

attend school because they, or their parents, do not value them being there, they have something else they'd rather do, or nothing is stopping them from skipping school" (p. 7). This study includes individual semi-structured interviews with seven high school students about their public education experience, seeking to understand what experiences or incidents along the way led to them feeling like attending school would not result in the same positive outcomes as their peers (Davies & Lee, 2006). Through student interviews, themes are identified to provide insights and guidance for educational leaders as they implement strategies to increase feelings of school connectedness and attendance rates for students.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy?

Research Design

"A measure was developed to assess the ecological and developmental dimensions of adolescent connectedness, defined as adolescents' caring for and involvement in specific relationships and contexts within their social ecology" (Karcher, 2001, p. 1). Karcher (2001, 2002, 2005) has studied adolescent connectedness and tested the validity of The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness. Karcher (2001) explains "five studies were conducted to test four hypotheses of the connectedness framework" (p. 10) and found that "correlations between other measures and the connectedness subscales and composite scales provided evidence of construct validity" (p. 28) and "test-retest and interitem reliability estimates were satisfactory" (p. 31). In another study, Karcher (2002) found that "connectedness measure subscales and composite scales demonstrated acceptable reliability and concurrent validity" (p. 1). The design of this study closely follows that of Karcher and Lee's (2005) work, The

Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness due to being developed with high validity and having a focus on adolescent connectedness.

The Hemmingway Measure identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. This study used a series of interview questions designed using the framework provided by Karcher and Lee's measure of adolescent development so all four major domains of adolescent connectedness were explored. A phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews was used to identify shared experiences amongst study participants and identify correlations between feelings of school connectedness and in-school attendance rates (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling as the researcher had direct access to many potential study participants, due to the researcher's employment, and hand-picked participants based on the researcher's personal judgment (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022). Purposive sampling in this study utilized a target population which is "the population where the phenomenon of interest occurs and from where the researcher will extract the sample" (p. 85). The target population for this study were high school students identified as being chronically absent, meaning they have missed at least ten percent of school days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gennetian et al., 2018) and selected by the researcher, who was an administrator within the school.

Reaching a point of data saturation is one of the most acceptable standards in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data saturation is about the quality, not the quantity, of the data collected although Creswell (2013) provided recommendations on sample size for best

practices. Creswell (2013) suggested a sample size between five to twenty-five participants to provide adequate data for phenomenological studies. Morse (1995) recommended even fewer study participants, typically between six and ten, to provide a considerable amount of meaningful data in phenomenological research. With the guidance of Creswell (2013) and Morse (1995), seven participants were interviewed for this phenomenological study. However, if additional data were needed for inductive coding, due to a lack of consistent thematic codes, the researcher would have considered increasing the number of study participants. All participants were enrolled at a large public high school in the upper Midwest where the researcher was employed as an assistant principal.

Procedures

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling as the researcher hand-picked participants based on the researcher's personal judgment due to having direct access to participants (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022). The researcher utilized attendance data that was available due to working as an assistant principal in the school. At the time of running the attendance data, 1,086 students were enrolled at the high school during the 2023-2024 school year when research was conducted. The first report identified which students had at least one instance of the in-school-truant attendance code, which included 199 students. Next, the top twenty students with the highest rates of being in-school truant were identified and analyzed to confirm being deemed chronically absent, meaning they were absent for at least 10% of school days so far that school year. The researcher started with the student who had the highest rates of in-school truancy and worked through the list of students until enough participants were recruited to reach data saturation ($n = 7$). One student said no due to feeling uncomfortable, and

two students were no longer enrolled at the school. This resulted in seven of the top ten students with the highest rates of in-school truancy participating in the study.

Once students were identified, the researcher contacted each parent or guardian via telephone to introduce themselves as a researcher, described the purpose of the study, described how their child was identified, and answered questions. If a parent or guardian provided verbal approval in permitting their child to participate in the study, the researcher emailed the consent form to the parent/guardian to sign.

After the form was signed by the parent/guardian and returned to the researcher, the researcher called each student into the research room to introduce himself as a researcher, described the purpose of the study, described how the student was identified, and answered questions. If the student verbally approved participating in the study, the researcher read the assent form and asked the student to identify a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. If the student again agreed to participate in the study, the researcher worked with the student to identify a date for the semi-structured interview to occur. Once the scheduled interview date arrived, the researcher called the student back in and reread the assent form before starting the interview process.

Protection of Participants

Due to study participants being minors, the researcher obtained written consent from the participant's parent/guardian first. After receiving written consent, the researcher obtained verbal assent from study participants. To maintain confidentiality of participants, legal names were replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information was redacted. Interviews were

conducted on Zoom, without video and with only audio being recorded, and then stored on the researcher's secured laptop. Interview recordings were deleted after transcripts were created.

Data Collection

With the guidance of Creswell (2013) and Morse (1995), seven participants were interviewed for this phenomenological study. Interviews were conducted in the researcher's office where participants were familiar with. This space provided ample room for the researcher, study participant, and computer to record the interview. Each study participant was able to select the seat that felt most comfortable to them. After assent was provided to study participants, the researcher started the Zoom recording and notified the study participant of the recording beginning.

Thirty minutes was set up for each interview, but the actual duration averaged 17 minutes and ranged from 16 minutes to 22 minutes. Each of the seven interviews covered the same eight primary questions while about half of the interviews required subsequent questions to elicit deep and meaningful insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an explanatory study, the researcher intended to gather enough data to "explain the connection between phenomena or variables" and provide the *why* behind a social phenomenon that other study types cannot provide (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022, p. 143).

Data Analysis

Student interviews were recorded on Zoom, version 5.16.2, with Live Transcription enabled, which created the initial transcription for each interview. The researcher reviewed each transcription to confirm accuracy and saved the transcriptions via Microsoft Word then deleted the Zoom recording files. Once transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher, the researcher

contacted each participant by telephone to confirm accuracy of the transcription and themes. This is a process called member-checking to ensure validity of the transcripts (Peoples, 2021).

After participants verified their transcripts through member-checking, a spreadsheet was created and used to begin the preliminary analysis process. As a phenomenological study, thematic interpretation was the method for analyzing and understanding data collected through student interviews to identify patterns and themes. Inductive coding starts the data analysis process without any predetermined codes, allowing the participant narrative to drive the discovery of themes and codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both deductive and inductive coding were used.

Deductive coding is a top-down approach that uses predetermined codes identified from the literature review (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022). The codes selected for deductive coding came from Karcher and Lee's (2005) work, *The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness* which identified four major domains of adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. Within those four domains include sixteen ecological subscales. The four major domains and select subscales were used during the deductive coding process. Select subscales include friends, self-in-the-present, parents, school, peers, teachers, and self-in-the-future.

Inductive coding, on the other hand, is a bottom-up approach that “allows the data to suggest their own significant perceptions” (2022, p. 147). Braun and Clarke (2006) note inductive analysis is “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions” (p. 83). Inductive reasoning provided an opportunity for new codes to be identified as the phenomena of school connectedness and in-school attendance was experienced differently for each participant.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for conducting thematic analysis, the researcher analyzed data in this order:

Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data

This is when transcriptions from interviews were created, and initial ideas were noted down.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

The researcher analyzed each data set and identified each with a designated color that related to one of the four major ecological domains as described with The Hemmingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. This began the deductive coding process. If a piece of transcription data did not belong in one of these four major ecological domains, they were highlighted a different color to analyze independently as inductive coding could identify a new experience with the phenomena of school connectedness and attendance that The Hemmingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness may not have identified.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Codes identified in Phase 2 were organized into broader themes during phase three. An initial thematic map was created during this phase to start identifying main overarching themes and sub-themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended a two-step process during this phase. The first step entailed the researcher analyzing each set of codes to determine if a coherent pattern has

been created, causing some themes to adjust, combine, or be removed altogether. The second step considered the overall validity of the entire data set. After reviewing the themes carefully, the researcher decided to review codes from phase three again to add missed data points to the thematic map in this phase. This more accurate approach developed the thematic map.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

This phase focused on the process Braun and Clarke (2006) called “define and refine” (p. 92) where the researcher identified the essence behind each theme and determined what component of the data each theme captured.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The researcher created a report that included the thematic analysis map and several data extracts to provide a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (p. 93). The final report is a compelling illustration of how seven high school students have experienced a disconnect in school connectedness and how that disconnection has impacted their attendance.

Instruments

The researcher was the data collector as the interviews were conducted in-person with the study participants. The researcher’s laptop was used as an instrument that recorded each interview with the Zoom application. A paper copy of the questionnaire (Appendix C) was used during each interview as this guided the researcher through the identified questions and sub-questions.

Role of the Researcher

During the data collection process, the role of the researcher included several intentional steps. The researcher's role was to create an interview environment where each study participant would feel comfortable and safe to engage in the interview questions and limit the feeling of harm as much as possible. The researcher then had a role of recording interviews via Zoom but creating an experience that felt natural and comfortable for participants, despite a camera recording the interview and being the student's school administrator. During the interview, the researcher had a role of asking questions and sub-questions that would get to the root narrative of participant experiences, which was unique for each interviewee. This required the researcher to be an active listener and provided the ability to understand the participant's thought process as they shared their experiences.

To understand how a participant experienced the social phenomenon of school connectedness, the researcher had to understand their mental models related to school. The researcher was qualified to facilitate this process due to credible personal experience and training. The researcher was a current assistant principal at the high school the participants attended and had a pre-established connection to each student. Additionally, the researcher was a high school counselor prior to their role in administration and had six years of experience supporting students through social-emotional, academic, and career needs. These experiences provided the researcher with important skills in active listening, empathy, and communicating clearly with adolescents during the data collection process.

Previous Knowledge and Bias

Bias and previous knowledge are major considerations for this study. The researcher was an active assistant principal where the participants attended school. This role provided a

significant amount of knowledge related to each participant's functioning at school, attendance behavior, and academic outcomes. A principal is tasked with increasing attendance rates and academic outcomes for students. Sometimes, this means a principal implements strategies or programs that have consequences to a student who voluntarily skips class or school. The researcher is aware that school principals could be the catalyst for a student feeling a lower sense of school connectedness prior or during high school. Therefore, some participants may not have felt entirely comfortable sharing their experiences honestly. However, the researcher used purposive sampling to help address this concern but being selective of which students to invite into the study. The researcher had built positive rapport with many students identified in the attendance data reports and was mindful to invite students who *would* feel comfortable with their principal as a researcher.

The researcher would have prior knowledge of attendance-related behaviors for each participant but used the pre-identified interview questions to decrease opportunities for biases to appear during the interview. Each participant was asked the same eight major questions and the same sub-questions.

While bias and previous knowledge are noteworthy in this study, the researcher argues that these components actually aided in the validity of this study. If not for the relationship already established between the researcher and participants, the participant responses to the major themes, particularly those identified through inductive coding, may not have been as rich or meaningful due to participants not feeling comfortable with the researcher.

Qualifications

The researcher's training and experience conducting interviews for the purpose of research consists of formal classes through the Doctor of Education program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. This program provided supervision and direction through highly qualified instructors and course requirements. The researcher's experience as a school counselor and school administrator also provided experience in conducting interviews in a manner that was safe, supportive, and welcoming for adolescents.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth's (2018) framework for considering ethical considerations was utilized at each point in the research process from prior to conducting the study, beginning the study, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting data, and publishing the study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study was also obtained from the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB board to ensure this study was ethically sound.

As a school administrator, the researcher had to be mindful when selecting participants for this study. There may have been several students who have experienced educational trauma that were identified at the attendance data pull process. Part of their educational trauma could have stemmed from white, male, school administrators such as the researcher during their earlier years in education, so asking them to engage in a study where they may feel extra vulnerable about that topic would not have been appropriate. To mitigate this concern, the researcher relied on relationships that were already established and perceived as positive. The researcher recalled which students on the identified list greeted me in the hallway, engaged in conversations about their lives outside of school, and were receptive to adult support.

A safeguard established to protect participants was the use of pseudonyms. This added layer of protection helped maintain a high level of confidentiality for each study participant in the results and reflection section of the study. Another safeguard established was not identifying the reason for the meeting with each student when the researcher updated their work calendar. Various individuals within the organization have access to my calendar titles, so the researcher was mindful not to reveal the reason for meeting with these identified students as it related to the study.

Due to the participants being minors, each participant was read an assent letter, as approved by the school district and IRB. The language used in this assent letter was age-appropriate and detailed enough for the participants to be fully informed and empowered in the study process.

Summary

A strong correlation exists between school attendance and positive school outcomes such as increased graduation rates, stronger sense of belonging, and a higher grade-point average (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020). With approximately 15% of students within the United States being identified as chronically absent (Hamlin, 2021), administrators are tasked with improving attendance rates for students. While attendance data is quantitative in nature, understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of school belonging and attendance should be the core focus for administrators as these are powerful indicators of how students have been impacted within the school system. By understanding the student experiences and perceptions, resources, policies, and strategies can be refocused to have stronger impacts on student outcomes.

Conducting seven semi-structured interviews with students who demonstrate concerning attendance behavior did take a considerable amount of time and work. However, even without the purpose of a dissertation, school administrators should still invest time in understanding the qualitative components when reviewing attendance data to develop a deeper understanding of the function behind student behavior. Without this information, a gap between student needs and educator assumptions may continue to widen, making attendance strategies based purely on quantitative data even less impactful.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Introduction

Attending school at the secondary level is an important component to achieving academic success but some students find themselves going to school and not attending all classes. Choosing not to attend class indicates a potential disconnect in how connected a student feels to their school environment. Understanding what factors have contributed to a student feeling disconnected, but going to school and skipping classes, called in-school truancy, is imperative for school leaders to understand so strategies and resources can be aligned when addressing attendance concerns. The purpose of this study was to explore how students with the highest rates of in-school truancy perceive their experience in education to identify perceived factors that have impacted their truancy behavior. This qualitative, phenomenological study was exploratory in nature, seeking to understand the lived experiences of students through semi-structured interviews. This chapter provides a description of the study sample, data analysis procedures, and results of this study.

Role of the Researcher

At the time of this study, the researcher had worked in K-12 public education for eight years at two large public high schools within the same district. The first six years, the researcher served as a Professional School Counselor and the two most recent years as an Assistant Principal. The researcher enjoyed working with students and learning about each individual student's life story. Both a Professional School Counselor and Assistant Principal role provided opportunities for the researcher to learn how students perceive the world around them and was able to positively impact students in their skill development to overcome barriers and challenges.

The researcher picked this topic to seek understanding of student perceptions and lived experiences within the school environment. This is the approach taken daily as an educator and was something the researcher felt passionate about studying deeper. The researcher also believed in the power of creating space for students by using their voices, telling their stories, and advocating for themselves. Since the researcher worked closely with the study participants, the researcher had to be mindful of biases to ensure data were collected and analyzed from a bias-free approach. The doctoral program in which the researcher attended provided comprehensive training, support, and expertise in research methodology, giving the researcher adequate training to conduct this study.

Description of the Sample

The seven participants were selected using purposive sampling as the researcher had direct access to many potential study participants, due to the researcher's employment, and hand-picked participants based on judgment (Suarez Sousa & Bradbury, 2022). Purposive sampling in this study utilized a target population which is "the population where the phenomenon of interest occurs and from where the researcher will extract the sample" (p. 85). The target population for this study were high school students identified as being chronically absent, meaning they have missed at least ten percent of school days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gennetian et al., 2018) and selected by the researcher, who was an administrator within the school.

The researcher utilized attendance data that was available due to working at the school participants attended. At the time of running attendance data, 1,086 students were enrolled at the high school during the 2023-2024 school year when research was conducted. The first report identified which students had at least one period of the in-school-truant attendance code, which included 199 students. Next, the top twenty students with the highest rates of being in-school

truant were identified and analyzed to confirm being chronically absent, meaning they were absent for at least 10% of school days so far that school year. The researcher started with the student who had the highest number of in-school truant absences and worked down the list. The first student declined the invitation, the second and tenth students moved out of the school, and the seventh student did not have a signed parent consent form returned. Therefore, the researcher was able to successfully interview seven of the top eleven students with the highest rates of in-school truancy for this study. Table 1 gives additional information about the age and gender of the participants.

Table 1

Participant Gender and Age

Name*	Gender	Age
Frederick	Male	14 years, 10 months
Julian	Male	15 years, 10 months
Harold	Male	15 years, 6 months
Rose	Female	17 years, 10 months
Jesus	Male	15 years, 7 months
Berry	Male	15 years, 4 months
Ariel	Female	15 years, 1 month

*pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

The research question was: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy?

The researcher conducted all interviews on the high school campus which the researcher and study participants attended. All interviews were conducted face-to-face with Zoom recording

the audio for transcription purposes. Participants had the option to choose the date and time of the interview for when they felt most comfortable for the conversation. Thirty minutes was set up for each interview, but the actual duration averaged 17 minutes and ranged from 16 minutes to 22 minutes.

After the seven interviews were completed, the researcher used NVivo, a software program, to create preliminary meaning units (codes) that the researcher outlined in Chapter 2. These deductive codes became the initial codes that started the coding process for this study. The researcher then followed the six steps outlined in Chapter 3, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for conducting thematic analysis.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data

This was the first step in the data analysis process. The interview was automatically transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature. While Zoom generally did an acceptable job capturing the content of the interview, the researcher closely reviewed transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Additionally, the researcher removed any unnecessary language (um, like, you know, etc.).

Member-checking with participants was used to address the validity of the transcripts. Participants confirmed via telephone that the stories, themes, and conclusions interpreted by the researcher were an accurate interpretation of their lived experiences (Peoples, 2021).

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

This step allowed the researcher to look at the data and begin creating preliminary meaning units. Meaning units consist of words or statements that bring meaning to a characteristic of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher inputted four deductive codes

that were derived from the four major ecological domains within The Hemmingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. Data that did not belong in one of these four major ecological domains were set aside and reviewed after the deductive coding process was completed. The inductive coding reviewed all the data again, including data set aside during the deductive coding process. The researcher created a list of 35 preliminary meaning units. Table 2 below is a listing of the final meaning units that were created. The 35 preliminary meaning units are listed in the far-right column.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Preliminary codes identified in Phase 2 were organized into broader themes during Phase 3. An initial thematic map was created during this phase to start identifying Final Meaning Units (or themes). The researcher attempted to understand how each participant had experienced education so far and what perceived contributing factors had impacted their experiences. Table 2 shows the six Final Meaning Units in the center column. The first four are the deductive codes while the last two were emerging themes identified through the inductive coding process.

Table 2*Final Meaning Units*

Research Question	Final Meaning Unit (Theme)	Preliminary Meaning Unit
Experiences of Students	Friends	No classes with friends Engaging activities Risk-taking activities Feelings of safety Trust is important
	School	Overwhelming environment Physical movement is missing Boring classes Long and exhausting days Peer conflict Too many responsibilities Joining clubs is great Teachers are impactful Academic help Welcoming environment Elementary model
	Parents	Strict parent Financial instability Housing instability
	Self	External factors Capable of success No passion Big personality feels exhausting Proud of improvements Hope for the future
	Lack of Control	Bullying Feeling trapped Felt unsafe in the classroom Inconsistent classroom procedures Inconsistent principal response Lack of teacher support
	Effort versus Value Perception	A diploma is not needed School is outdated Popular students have the advantage Friends are more fun than learning

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In this step, the researcher analyzed each set of codes to determine if a coherent pattern has been created, causing some themes to adjust, combine, or be removed altogether. The researcher then considered the overall validity of the entire data set and used direct quotes from the interviews to better understand the lived experiences of participants related to the identified theme.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

This phase focused on the process Braun and Clarke (2006) called “define and refine” (p. 92) where the researcher identified the essence behind each theme and determined what component of the data each theme captured. The researcher collaborated with two professors within the doctoral program to ensure themes had been refined and defined as concisely as possible without losing the essence of participant experiences.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The researcher created a report that included the thematic analysis map and several data extracts to provide a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (p. 93). The final report is a compelling illustration of how seven high school students with high rates of in-school truancy perceive contributing factors that have impacted their school experience.

Results

Research Question: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy?

Theme 1. Friends.

Karcher (2001) describes the ecological domain of *friends* as an environment where risk-taking behaviors occur, there is a sense of trust, and an adolescent feels safe communicating personal issues. Each of the seven participants was asked what they would be doing instead of going to class if they chose to skip. Participants were also asked about their feelings towards school both during elementary school and now that they are older. These questions elicited many responses about friendships and how they felt about their friends. All participants expressed positive feelings about spending time with their friends. Fredrick said, “I just like whenever it’s me and my friends” and indicated he would attend more classes if his friends were with him. Ariel said, “I still don’t like to get up in the morning, but I look forward to seeing my friends” indicating a motivation to attend school to see her friends. Julian reported, “I like our group, the group we have now” when asked about his feelings about his friend group. Participants expressed feelings of excitement and safety when they spend time with their friends, both of which were felt less often within the academic setting such as a classroom. The next two subthemes further explore outcomes of these friendships.

Subtheme 1. Engaging Activities

Karcher suggests risk-taking behaviors occur when adolescents feel connected to their friends, which is consistent with what some participants indicated. Julian, for example, said, “the only fun is when I’m doing dumb things with friends” and Berry said, “we’d do donuts in the parking lots; just stupid teenager stuff.” Ariel noted, “it’s more fun being with your friends.” All seven participants shared comments about how much more fun being with friends is compared to being in classes. Julian, for example, commented, “I was just at the point, like, I would rather be doing this than be in science” when referring to hanging out with friends.

Subtheme 2. Feelings of Safety

Participants were asked how they felt when they were around their friends. All participants indicated feeling connected to a group of friends and feelings related to safety. Julian said he feels good to have a group that he fits in with. When asked what he would be doing when not in class, Julian stated, “hanging out with friends because that’s how the whole skipping thing kind of started.” When referring to a specific friend, Julian added, “he’s just one of those people that’s fun to be around no matter what.” When asked the same question, Berry stated, “hanging out with people I trust or sitting in a space where I feel the calmest. It gives me time to calm down.” Instead of going to class, Jesus said, “I’ll leave in my brother’s car. I feel safe when I’m with my brother.” Participant responses indicate a need to feel safe at school.

The theme of friends provides a significant amount of insight on contributing factors from the participant experience. The next theme explores factors within the school setting that impact participants’ sense of belonging.

Theme 2. School.

Karcher (2001) describes the ecological domain of *school* as how hard school is, how successful an adolescent can be, how important school is, and how involved adolescents are at school. The study participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in elementary school and then share how different high school is from their elementary school experiences. All participants had a lot to share about their experiences in school, including both positively and negatively perceived contributing factors to how they felt about school. For example, all participants were able to recall at least one teacher who left a positive impact on them while most participants indicated feeling overwhelmed in the high school environment. The first four of the

following subthemes are perceived positive contributing factors while the last three subthemes are perceived negative contributing factors to their overall school experience.

Subtheme 1. Teachers are Protective Factors

Participants were asked if a teacher or staff member stuck out to them during their earlier elementary school years. Participants were also asked how they feel at school now they are older. All participants were able to identify at least one teacher who has positively impacted them and commented on how meaningful, supportive teachers are to them now that they are older. To protect the privacy of the educators mentioned, in addition to ensuring anonymity for participants, staff names will be referenced simply as ‘teacher’.

While all participants shared positive remarks on an impactful teacher, Harold, Rose, Jesus, and Berry provided specific examples of what made their teacher remarkable. Harold said, “Ms. Teacher was great. She was my first-grade teacher. She listened a lot, honestly. She helped me when I needed it, and I would go visit her office since she was my favorite teacher in that school.” Similarly, Rose commented, “my first-grade teacher. She was super nice, and she was always understanding and respectful. She let everyone work at their own pace.” Jesus shared about his kindergarten teacher, saying, “she’s a heartwarming person. She was so special to me. She was always nice to me; caring and safe.” Berry stated, “he was one of my favorite teachers whenever I did go to school. He helped me with a lot of my schoolwork that I had missed because he knew what my situation was like.” Teachers appear to be a contributing factor to a student feeling connected at school and the next subtheme highlights specific environmental factors that may contribute to feeling connected.

Subtheme 2. Welcoming Environment

Some participants commented on how welcoming the high school environment felt for them. Harold said, “high school has a more welcoming environment than the other schools I have been to. Most of the teachers are very welcoming and understanding.” Ariel noted, “I actually think school is a great environment.” Rose stated, “I just love the positive and negative relationships you can build in high school” and added, “I like creating bonds with teachers because it makes me feel like learning is more entertaining.” When asked if her teachers notice when she is not in class, Ariel said yes and noted her teachers say, “I missed you in class today.” Ariel also shared that she has a lot of support at school, saying, “whenever I'm sad or anything I always have somebody I can go to even if it's not a friend. I can always go to staff member [one] or staff member [two]. I love staff member [two].” Ariel feels supported by these staff members. The next subtheme will discuss participant experiences related to school involvement.

Subtheme 3. Clubs and Activities

A few participants shared how their experiences being involved in clubs or activities impacted their experience at school. Rose said joining clubs has been great and her biggest take away from high school is discovering her passion in caring for students with disabilities. Ariel loves choir, stating “I’ve had the same choir teacher for a couple of years. It’s just something I’ve always done; a consistent thing.” A couple participants provided specific examples of why they are not more involved in their school community, reporting feelings of boredom. Fredrick stated, “I just got bored of classes so I kind of just stopped going to them” and Julian shared school is “kind of boring.” Participants who were engaged and invested into a class or activity reported positive feelings about their involvement while those not engaged reported feeling

bored. Although only two participants explicitly stated they were involved in school activities, the next subtheme explores how participants felt about their potential to achieve success.

Subtheme 4. Academic Success is Possible

Participants were asked if they believe they can be successful at school. Participants indicated they believe they *could* be successful at school if they had enough support and found a personal interest in the subject. Fredrick stated, “if it was my elective, and I actually liked it, then I would not find it difficult” and added “I know I can be successful because that's something I'm interested in.” Ariel said, “It really depends on what subject. I really struggle in science, but other than that, it's not hard.” Harold says it depends on what class it is, adding, “if it's more like math and science, it's pretty difficult without help.” Berry shared, “I believe I could follow through with school all the way to graduation.”

The first four subthemes within the school theme indicated positive contributing factors to participant experiences at school and the next three subthemes discuss negative contributing factors identified by participants.

Subtheme 5. Long School Days

Many participants expressed frustration with the long school days compared to elementary school. Berry shared, “I don't like to sit in a desk for six and a half hours. I can't do it. I can't.” Similarly, Ariel stated, “my schedule is a lot, and I have eight classes. I got to do work for all those classes. It's exhausting. I think the aspect of school is good but it's so long.” When reflecting on her elementary experience, Ariel added, “I have eight classes now, rather than elementary school where there's one class.” Fredrick shared, “the longer it was going on, the more I got bored then I started disliking school.” When reflecting on his elementary and

middle school experience, Harold shared, “my school experiences from elementary school and middle school weren’t very great. Those were times where you couldn’t really take a break from anything.” While participants had unique reasons as to why school days were too long, they shared a common feeling that more breaks would have been helpful in making it through the day.

Subtheme 6. Overwhelming Environment

All seven participants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed due to the nature of the school’s large and stimulating environment. Some participants shared feeling overwhelmed due to the amount of people, some related to the number of tasks, and others related to the constant energy.

Fredrick shared he feels “annoyed because there’s always a lot more stuff going on. There’s a lot more noise and there’s more people.” Rose shared, “There’s so much random little things coming at you all the time. It gets exhausting. I get so over stimulated and overwhelmed where I feel like I can’t be in such a big setting.” Ariel reflected on how she’s handling high school and stated, “it’s real now and it’s such a dramatic change from middle school. I feel like I am doing better than I was in middle school but it’s a big change.” Jesus shared that high school is a bigger school and that there are “a lot of new people.”

The next subtheme identified another negative contributing factor for participant experience at school but also provides insights on what participants would benefit with.

Subtheme 7. Lack of Physical Breaks

Many participants commented on how impactful nap time and recess was for them during elementary school. When discussing their high school experience, participants referenced a desire to take more breaks, such as naps or time outside. Fredrick, Julian, and Ariel particularly

commented on how much they appreciated these components of elementary school. Fredrick said, “I always had to go outside and sometimes have naps. It was very nice.” Julian also liked nap time, stating, “I only liked it [elementary school] because of nap time.” Ariel looked forward to gym, recess, and lunch. She also said, “I have a big personality and a lot of energy. Then when I lose that energy, it’s a lot and I just want to go to sleep.” When reflecting on high school, Rose shared, “I wish we had more windows, more outside time, more free time to go outside, and more open space.”

The theme of school provides a significant amount of insight on contributing factors from the participant experience. The next theme explores participant-parent relationships and how those relationships may impact their experiences at school.

Theme 3. Parents.

Karcher (2001) describes the ecological domain of *parents* as how involved adolescents are in involving and caring for their families. This includes the amount of time spent with their parents, the degree of caring for their parents, and how well they get along with their parents. Participants provided a few remarks of their parents in relation to their school experiences. Ariel shared that her dad was involved with the community, so he was well-known by the staff at her school. She reports, “my dad was really strict, so if I did have friends, I wasn’t allowed to have sleepovers.” Ariel shared, “I’ve changed schools like every year. When I was with my mom, I was late a lot, but my dad had a car.” Ariel also reports making the A-honor roll during that time, which was during middle school. Berry shared about his middle school experience as well, stating, “in middle school, I was never there. I never had a ride or anything. We lived in a trailer in the middle of nowhere and always had a broken-down car.” While Fredrick did not speak

explicitly about his parents or family, he did share, “external events in my life happened and is what changed my funness.”

The theme of parents did not provide significant amount of insights on how parent perceptions impact participants’ sense of belonging. Recommendations will be shared in Chapter 5 to address this gap. The next theme and subtheme present the findings related to how participants viewed themselves.

Theme 4. Self.

Karcher (2001) provides an ecological domain of self-in-the-present and self-in-the-future. This study investigated the *self-in-the-present* domain, which is described as relating to one’s self-esteem; based on perceived likeness by others and self-awareness on unique skills or talents one possesses. Participants reflected on different aspects of themselves; some shared about their social-emotional wellness and others shared their academic abilities.

Ariel and Rose both reflected on their emotional maturity since middle school, setting them up to achieve academic success. Ariel stated, “I like when I get organized, and I am doing good. It feels really good to have everything on track.” However, Ariel also noted, “I feel like I don’t have a passion and that scares me.” Julian shared about the social concept of popularity, how he does or does not fit into the popular group, and his feelings about it. He said, “there’s some people I kind of feel I can fit in with, but it depends on who is in the class.” Julian also shared, “some people are the popular ones, and some aren’t. It’s unfair because out of nowhere you can be nobody or the popular one out of just walking in the school on the first day.”

Rose reflected on how others perceived her behavior. She stated, “I’ve noticed that some random girls in the halls have made little comments like, ‘you’re never in class’ and that hits you

differently. It's like, woah, I don't even know these people and they picked up on it." Rose continued reflecting on her emotional responses, stating, "I acted out inappropriately at school just because I was hurting. It's just when you're in so deep, you just don't want to hear it anymore."

Berry shared more about his middle school academics, stating, "when I lived in a different state, in middle school there, I knew I wasn't going to pass. There was 0% chance I was going to." He then reflected on his academic disadvantage when entering high school by stating, "I was starting high school without knowing most of this. It's definitely more difficult. Harder to get to school. Harder to get it done. Harder to pay attention."

Subtheme 1. Hope For the Future

Participants were asked what advice they would have for their future selves. This was to learn if, and how, participants viewed their futures in relation to skills, abilities, and possibilities. Julian shared how much better he can communicate with people if he owns a mechanic shop someday. He encouraged himself to, "work hard and make the money to have the life you've always wanted." Harold said, "I hope to be a more level-headed person and don't do stupid things." Rose encouraged herself to "stay calm and please make it to where you want to make it." Jesus encouraged himself to "have an open mind and stop thinking about the past. You got to be thinking about what you're going to be doing for the next five years." Berry encouraged himself to "try and pay attention more. Go to class. Be there on time. And just follow the rule book. That's what everybody should do." Despite participants expressing various challenging and difficulties with school, they expressed hope for what their future selves could achieve.

The next two themes and subthemes were identified during the inductive coding process, which the researcher has called emerging issues. These themes explore contributing factors identified by participants that did not connect with the thematic codes identified during the deductive coding process.

Theme 5. Lack of Control

The first four themes were identified during the deductive coding process. The researcher also identified themes using inductive coding to understand contributing factors that were not connected to the theory of adolescent connectedness. The researcher has called these themes ‘emerging issues’. One emerging issue from participants was the perceived lack of control, particularly in situations where they felt unsafe or unsupported. This emerging issue indicates students feel inequities in school responses, feeling a sense of distrust with the adults at school, and a desire to have more control. One area of control that participants discussed is the lack of control with school procedures being applied fairly.

Subtheme 1. Inconsistent School Procedures

Jesus talked about inconsistent expectations within the classroom. He said, “when I ask to use the bathroom, and they don’t let me... and then somebody else goes and asks to go to the bathroom and he lets them go. That doesn’t add up.” Harold shared about an experience he had in elementary school, stating, “it was more so the principal that was running it that was the problem. The kids got away with a lot of things they shouldn’t have.” Julian felt inconsistent responses from the school when he was bullied in second grade. He shared, “I tried to get people to stop, and I couldn’t. I just hated it. They [staff] constantly said it’s just a word but then if I ever did it, I would get in trouble for it.” Berry feels that the school’s response to him being tardy is unfair. He said, “say I go to school at 9:40, that’s when my class starts. I get there at 9:42 and I

am marked tardy. It seems a little unfair that I'm riding a bike here, I am late, and I am marked tardy. That's not my fault. I can't call myself out because I'm not of age yet."

Subtheme 2. Teacher Support

Some participants shared stories of when they perceived teachers as being unhelpful and, for some, harmful. Jesus talked about an elementary teacher, sharing, "she got so mad at me. She started yelling at me. I was trying to walk out of the classroom, but she kept walking in front of me. I didn't know what was going to go down. I did not feel safe when I couldn't leave the classroom." Harold stated, "most of the time, when I asked for help, I didn't get that." When discussing attendance patterns, Jesus talked about staff, stating, "everybody be on my ass. The counselor's going to be on me, the principals are going to be asking me where I'm at and they'll get annoyed. It feels like you're on the run."

Rose expressed frustration when teachers paid extra special attention to students in sports, stating, "teachers tend to leech onto them." She also felt hurt by a staff member who she perceived as being dismissive of her emotions. Rose shared, "She didn't ask me about anything else. She was just like, 'you don't have an excuse to act like that just because of what you went through' when she knew, in detail, what it was. I felt disappointed." During times of frustration or uncertainty, participants were able to identify skills or superpowers that would have been helpful.

Subtheme 3. Superpowers

Participants were asked to recall a time in school when they felt unsafe or unsupported. The follow-up question was: If you could go back in time to that very moment with a superpower of any kind, what type of superpower would you want and how would that

superpower change the outcome for you? All seven participants provided a desired superpower and predicted how the outcome would have been different. Two participants would want to read minds, two would want to be super smart, and three would want the ability to teleport or have super speed.

Rose and Julian would like to read or control minds. The intention with this superpower is to predict what others are thinking or to control what they say. Ariel and Berry would like to be super smart or the most intelligent person, with the intent of school being less of a burden. Ariel stated, "I wouldn't have to worry about school" and Berry stated, "I'd be able to know everything, be able to pass everything, and go on with what I need to." Fredrick would like super speed so that "nothing bad could ever happen." Jesus would want to teleport himself to his home while Harold would want to teleport others to where they are supposed to be. A theme with Fredrick, Jesus, and Harold's response is the ability to control where they are to ensure safety.

The next theme identified a gap in how valuable participants viewed education, particularly during times of stress or uncertainty.

Theme 6. Effort Versus Value Perception

A couple of the participants reflected on how they feel school is irrelevant or outdated. Fredrick said, "I think there's some jobs that don't really require a diploma but all I need is a GED." Berry shared, "the world has come up with so much, yet school is just really outdated from what we have now. You can go on Google and find anything you want or please, and you can learn a lot from it. But school is just for things like learning to be smart, showing you how to get a job later, be able to communicate better, and focus more."

Reflection

Three of the most crucial pieces the researcher learned about the participants were:

- Students believe they can be successful in school ($n = 6/7$)
- Teachers have, and continue to be, extremely impactful on student perceptions of belonging and support ($n = 7/7$)
- Students need a higher sense of control ($n = 7/7$)

Participants in this study were identified and recruited due to having some of the highest rates of in-school truancy amongst their peers. Research (Cuellar et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020; Hamlin, 2021) suggests they are more likely to experience higher rates of failed courses and are at increased risk of dropping out compared to their peers who attend class regularly. Despite what the research suggests, participants in this study indicate a strong sense of belief that they can be successful in school. For some, this means increased support from staff is needed, and for others, this means an increased interest in the content or a desire to be successful. This finding shows there are still opportunities to positively influence the perspectives and behavior of adolescents in high school.

A recurring positive contributing factor to a sense of belonging is a strong connection with a teacher or staff member. All participants shared fond memories of a teacher that made a positive impact on them at one point in their educational journey and what seems to be a desire to have more positive relationships with teachers. A recurring negative contributing factor that impacts a student's experience at school is a low sense of control. While structure and policies are in place to support students, participants indicate feeling unsafe or unsupported in times when they perceive having little or no control in the situation. If provided with a superpower during those times, all participants selected a power that would grant them more control. It is important for

schools to provide opportunities for students to feel a heightened sense of control, especially during times of frustration.

Summary

The preceding chapter provided an introduction, sample descriptors, data analysis procedures, and results of the study. Seven participants shared their story related to school experiences from elementary school to the time of this study, highlighting perceptions of contributing factors that positively and negatively impacted their experiences in schools. The researcher was reminded how impactful teacher and staff relationships are with students regardless of their age, the need for students to feel in control, and the student belief that they can still be successful in school.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The need for this study arose directly from the research problem to better understand contributing qualitative factors of students experiencing high rates of in-school truancy. The purpose of this study was to identify factors during a student's primary and secondary education years that impacted behavior of being in-school truant, or in other words, going to school but skipping classes. The literature review encompassed many components related to this research study such as the importance of attending school, factors that impact a sense of belonging, and the implications of skipping classes. The sample size and location for this study included seven participants from a large Midwestern public high school that supports grades nine through twelve. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the seven participants to collect data. This study used a phenomenological method and aimed to collect rich data about each of the seven participants' lived experiences in school.

The theoretical framework for this study was the Adolescent Connectedness Theory (Karcher, 2000). This theory recognizes that while each person is their own distinct self, they are connected to others by experiencing a deeper sense of being. Adolescent connectedness is a key component of positive youth development. To better understand and measure adolescent connectedness, Karcher and Lee (2005) created a model called The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness. This model identified four major ecological domains that contribute to an adolescent feeling connected: friends, school, parents, and self. Within these four domains exist fifteen sub-domains. This study focused on the four main ecological domains of friends, school, parents, and self to explore contributing factors of connectedness for the seven high school participants. The significance of this study is that the findings can be shared with all

stakeholders within an adolescent's life who are committed to their education. By understanding contributing factors to connectedness in school, parents, teachers, administrators, and students can shift resources towards the positive factors that contribute to feelings of connectedness and avoid or lessen the negative factors. These resources could better support an adolescent's connectedness and ultimately increase the likelihood of a student attending classes more regularly and achieving more positive academic outcomes.

The research question was: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy?

The following sections discuss each of the six themes presented in Chapter 4, which are analyzed alongside the existing literature discussed in chapter two.

Friends

Interview questions prompted participants to consider what activities they preferred doing when they chose to skip class and with whom. Participants expressed feelings of excitement and safety when they spent time with their friends, both of which were felt less often within the academic setting such as a classroom. Several participants also commented on how they did not have many, if any, classes with their friends. Having only a "few friendships in class, lack of social support from classmates, and experience of classmates growing apart are indicators of children's lack of a sense of belonging to the class and connectedness to school" (Dannow et al., 2020, p. 33). Due to the lack of access to their friends within classes, participants opted to skip class to hang out with their friends. This is consistent with what Baskerville (2021) found, noting "being with outside-class friends offered an alternative to previous stressful classroom experiences; here, peer relationships were positive, mindful of others' feelings, respectful,

protective, and inclusive. The participants were included and accepted for who they were” (p. 842). Karcher (2001) describes the domain of *friends* as a group where an adolescent feels a sense of connectedness and trust, enabling them to share personal matters. This domain is also where risk-taking behavior occurs. Multiple participants commented on much fun they had with their friends. Julian, for example, said, “the only fun is when I’m doing dumb things with friends” and Berry notes, “we’d do donuts in the parking lots; just stupid teenager stuff.”

A theme that will be reviewed later in this chapter is the ‘effort versus value’ perception. The theme of friends connects to the theme of effort versus value perception because data indicates participants get more satisfaction from spending time with their friends than they feel when achieving success in class.

Another noteworthy result of this theme is the sense of safety participants felt with their friends. Schools have a tricky balance between compliance to create a safe environment and autonomy where students can associate with friends and receive respectful treatment (Baskerville, 2021; Davies & Lee, 2006). Friendships play an important role in adolescent development and these friendships can have positive or negative characteristics such as supporting feelings of connectedness or increasing risk-taking behaviors (Vitaro et al., 2009). When adolescents do not feel safe or supported in class, Baskerville (2021) suggests they may seek friends outside of class where they experience “trust, safety, belonging, and acceptance” (p. 842) and feel accepted for who they are. Results from this current study strongly echo the findings of existing literature. Participants in this study expressed a desire to seek out their trusted friendships when they are feeling unsafe or unsupported. For example, Berry stated he prefers to hang out “with people I trust” and Jesus preferred to be with his brother, saying “I feel safe when I’m with my brother.” This indicates the need for adolescents to feel the same sense of

safety that they experience with friends in all areas of their school day. The challenge is having students feel a sense of safety in a classroom with content with which they may not connect. Additionally, while participants need friends that provide a sense of safety and trust, two participants in this study explicitly discussed engaging in risk-taking behaviors that occurred when they were with friends. This presents a challenge for parents and educators in balancing access to friends while building skills to make decisions that will not place the student in dangerous or risky situations.

School

There is a strong correlation between school attendance and positive school outcomes such as increased graduation rates, a stronger sense of belonging, and higher grade point averages (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020). Chronically absent students, who miss at least 10% of school, are more likely to fail courses, have a decrease in school-connectedness, and have an increased risk of dropping out compared to their same-aged peers (Daily et al., 2020; Hamlin, 2021). Participants in this study were asked several questions that explored their experiences and perceptions as a student starting in kindergarten. Interview questions were designed to elicit insights about what factors stick out as being helpful or hurtful. Follow-up questions were asked to deepen the researcher's understanding of these lived experiences such as how participants felt in those moments, what they found to be unfair, and what skills or "superpowers" would have been helpful.

All seven participants were able to identify at least one teacher or staff member that positively impacted their sense of belonging or success, indicating the strong impact educators make on students. Some consistent qualities that made these educators stand out to participants include being positive, kind, welcoming, and patience. One participant, Jesus, shared about his

kindergarten teacher, stating, “she’s a heartwarming person. She was so special to me. She was always nice to me; caring and safe.” The existing literature highlights how important positive teacher connections are on feelings of connectedness. Students who have strong relationships with their teachers and have positive peer relations feel more connected to their school community and are more likely to achieve positive school outcomes compared to their peers who do not have a strong relationship with their school community (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Baskerville, 2021). Churchill et al. (2021) further confirmed that a connection to advisors positively impacts school outcomes such as tardiness, absences, and academic achievement.

Some participants shared positive attributes about the high school environment, in particular, being welcoming. Harold stated, “high school has a more welcoming environment than the other schools I have been to. Most of the teachers are very welcoming and understanding.” Rose shared, “I have a lot of teachers and security proctors that are there for me and want to see me do well” and Julian commented how he liked one high school teacher, saying “he did understand me.” These remarks indicate that an understanding teacher was a big contributing factor in making a school environment feel welcoming. A couple of participants contribute their involvement in activities as being a positive factor in their feelings of connectedness. Rose said joining clubs has been great and her biggest take away from high school is discovering her passion in caring for students with disabilities. Ariel loves choir, stating “I’ve had the same choir teacher for a couple of years. It’s just something I’ve always done; a consistent thing.” Literature shows involvement in activities is a contributing factor in an adolescent’s academic, psychological, and behavioral adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006) and can be transformative for a student’s sense of belonging and attitudes towards learning (Gorski, 2021). However, only two participants shared their involvement with activities, indicating a lack

of involvement by the other five participants. Results of this study are consistent with literature in that a student with high rates of truancy is more likely to experience a lower sense of connectedness, including involvement in activities.

Most participants provided strong and consistent feelings of exhaustion and stress from the general operations of their high school environment. Factors related to their school environment included long school days, too many people and noises, too many responsibilities, and not enough breaks. Berry specifically commented on the long school days, sharing, “I don’t like to sit in a desk for six and a half hours. I can’t do it. I can’t.” Fredrick stated he feels “annoyed because there’s always a lot more stuff going on. There’s a lot more noise and there’s more people.” Similarly, Rose stated, “I get so over stimulated and overwhelmed where I feel like I can’t be in such a big setting.” Three participants specifically noted how much they appreciated the breaks provided in elementary school, such as recess and nap time. Davies and Lee (2006) note that students experiencing mental health difficulties may also withdraw themselves from the school environment as the student views withdrawal as a solution to a problem, which aligns with how participants in this current study viewed truancy as a solution to their problem of an overwhelming school environment. Staff members might initially view this behavior as noncompliant and submit an office referral, but Davies and Lee suggest viewing behavior of disengagement as an indicator of a problem the student does not know how else to solve. Participant demographics in this study indicate that all but one participant was under the age of sixteen at the time of the study. The researcher points this out as the state law governing compulsory attendance where this school is located mandates students attend school until the age of sixteen. Literature (Bacon & Kearney, 2020; Gorski 2021; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022) would suggest that students exhibiting the level of disengagement like participants in this study

are more likely to drop-out than their regularly attending peers. Therefore, without a change in connectedness, participants in this study are at high risk of dropping out upon reaching the age of sixteen years.

Findings from this study align with current literature on teacher and school factors that contribute to a student's feeling of connectedness in class and school. In this study, all participants remembered teachers who positively and negatively impacted their experience at school, confirming the importance of healthy and positive teacher-student connections. Only two participants indicated involvement in some level of school-based activity, suggesting most participants were not involved in school-based activities. Besides the two participants noting how welcoming the high school environment felt, all participants shared specific details on what environmental factors contributed to their desire to escape the classroom and school building. The researcher of this study recommends opportunities for students to reconnect with previous educators who they identify as mentors or caring adults as they transition through grade levels. For example, as a student enters high school, they naturally do not have an opportunity to connect with a teacher who they felt connected to during elementary or middle school years. However, having an opportunity to continue an ongoing positive relationship with these educators may support the high school student in feeling capable of success or feeling more connected to the school environment.

Parents

This ecological domain focuses on how connected an adolescent feels to their parent. Research indicates that a sense of loyalty exists between an adolescent and their parent, and the allegiance they indicate to their parents' perspectives regarding topics such as education (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). Davies and Lee (2006) found a discrepancy in how parents and

teachers view contributing factors to truancy. “Parents perceived the main cause of truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers, and peer pressure – within-school factors. Teachers, on the other hand, believe that parental attitudes and home environments are more influential” (p. 205). The researcher had an assumption that participants would elaborate extensively on their perspectives related to their parent-child relationships, but this was a theme not strongly validated by the study. One participant shared remarks on external factors that are associated with her parents. Ariel shared, “my dad was really strict, so if I did have friends, I wasn’t allowed to have sleepovers.” Additionally, Ariel stated, “I’ve changed schools like every year. When I was with my mom, I was late a lot, but my dad had a car.” This theme is not strongly supported by participants, which the researcher believes was due to a lack of interview questions related to the ecological domain of parents, per Karcher (2001). Recommendations to address this are described later in this chapter.

Berry’s reflection indicated a potential financial barrier for his family at that time. He stated, “in middle school, I was never there. I never had a ride or anything. We lived in a trailer in the middle of nowhere and always had a broken-down car.” Chapter 2 reviewed literature related to how socio-economic status is a contributing factor for attendance and found that low-income students, typically those who qualify for free-or-reduced lunch (FRL) experience increased rates of chronic absenteeism, up to four times more likely, compared to their non-low-income peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2015, cited by Gennetian et al., 2018, p. 20). Since lunch status was not asked nor identified in this current study, the researcher was unable to discuss connections to lunch status and findings in the literature discussed in Chapter 2. A recommendation will be shared later in this chapter to address this need.

Self

Participants provided significant data related to how they perceive themselves, including their emotional responses during stressful situations, strengths, and hopes for the future. The researcher noticed participant responses related closely to egocentrism, stemming from Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development. Egocentrism is defined as "the lack of differentiation between one's own point of view and those of others" (Muuss, 1982, p. 249). The concept of adolescent egocentrism is important to acknowledge when learning about the lived experiences of adolescents as their experiences are their truth and need to be supported as such. During the data collection process of individual interviews, participants were transparent with their lived experiences and made remarks of how good they felt being able to simply share their experiences with someone who would listen. This reminded the researcher the importance of giving adolescents a voice to be heard and, more importantly, understood and validated.

Ariel shared, "I feel like I don't have a passion, and that scares me." She continued reflecting, "I think I personally need to work on personal aspects of myself and grow a little bit." Rose reflected on her emotional responses during her time in high school, noting, "I acted out inappropriately at school just because I was hurting." Both participants indicated an ability to deeply reflect on themselves, which is an important component in working through Piaget's (1936) stages of development, specifically to the Formal Operational Stage of Cognitive Development. This indicates participants are demonstrating age-appropriate behaviors through the lens of cognitive development.

Participants were asked questions to elicit whether, and how, they viewed their futures in relation to skills, abilities, and possibilities. Despite participants expressing various challenges and difficulties with school, they all expressed hope for what their future selves could achieve.

Julian encouraged himself to, “work hard and make the money to have the life you’ve always wanted.” Harold hopes “to be a more level-headed person and [not] do stupid things.” Rose encouraged herself to “stay calm and please make it to where you want to make it.” The researcher agrees with how Karcher (2001) defines connectedness: “adolescents’ ability to satisfy their need to belong through their multiple opportunities for connectedness with people and places” (p. 5). Participants expressed a desire to connect positively with others, including peers and school staff. They expressed feeling good about positive relationships where they were safe and supported while also expressing a need to escape situations and individuals where they were in danger of being hurt.

Lack of Control

This was the first of two emerging issues identified during the inductive coding process. A negative contributing factor, according to participants, occurred when they felt staff were not consistent and fair in their expectations. Julian shared a story about when he was bullied in second grade and his feelings of frustration when the school’s response was not fair. Julian stated, “I tried to get people to stop, and I couldn’t. I just hated it. They [staff] constantly said it’s just a word but then if I ever did it, I would get in trouble for it.” Jesus talked about an elementary teacher, sharing, “she got so mad at me. She started yelling at me. I was trying to walk out of the classroom, but she kept walking in front of me. I didn’t know what was going to go down. I did not feel safe when I couldn’t leave the classroom.”

Baskerville (2021) advised that when a student does not feel safe or has a low sense of belonging in class, they may seek positive peer interactions outside of class that feel welcoming, fun, and overall contribute to them feeling better about themselves. One participant, Harold, felt unwelcomed in class when he perceived the teacher as being inattentive to his needs. He stated,

“most of the time, when I asked for help, I didn’t get that.” A couple participants shared their feedback and frustrations related to a lack of control over selecting courses they have an interest in. For example, Fredrick stated, “I just got bored of classes so I kind of just stopped going to them” and Julian noted that class “is kind of hard since I got no interest in it. It’s just boring and I don’t want to do it on a desk.”

Participants were asked to recall a time at school they felt unsafe or unsupported. Then they were asked what superpower they would have wanted in that situation and how the superpower would have changed the outcome. All seven participants were able to describe a superpower that would have helped them. Two participants would want to read minds, two would want to be super smart and three would want the ability to teleport or have super speed. This indicates a need for the participants to feel some level of perceived control, particularly in situations they felt unsafe or unsupported. As mentioned earlier by Davies and Lee (2006), schools have a tricky balance between compliance to create a safe environment and autonomy where students can associate with friends and receive respectful treatment. Providing opportunities for adolescents to feel in control is important for their ability to navigate the situation without needing to escape.

Effort Versus Value Perception

This was the second of two emerging issues identified during the inductive coding process. A couple participants reflected on how they felt school is irrelevant and outdated. Fredrick said, “I think there’s some jobs that don’t really require a diploma but all I need is a GED.” Berry shared, “the world has come up with so much, yet school is just really outdated from what we have now. You can go on Google and find anything you want or please, and you can learn a lot from it. But school is just for things like learning to be smart, showing you how to

get a job later, be able to communicate better, and focus more.” The researcher appreciates the honesty of Fredrick and Berry as their responses provide clarity on what they value spending their time.

Teachers and administrators require post-secondary degrees, licensure, and continuing education credits. Educators tend to embody characteristics of what is commonly referred to as a lifelong learner. For example, during the 2022-2023 school year North Dakota had 9,128 teachers employed. Of these, 60.7% had completed their bachelor’s degree and 38.7% had completed their master’s degree (ND Insights, 2024). The researcher recognized that participants in this study may not view education as having the same value as the teachers they work with at school. This difference in perspectives is significant as it may be the highest contributing factor of in-school truancy for participants in this study. Dumas (2018) conducted a study related to this topic and found that “the results strongly implied that learning opportunities occur within students and not at the school-level” (p. 17). This finding suggests that the effort to attend classes versus the value of attending classes for participants in this study is based on individual factors and not school-based factors such as school context or school climate. This finding is both encouraging and concerning for educational leaders. On one hand, this finding implies school climate is not a sole contributing factor to a student seeing less value in their education compared to their peers. However, individual factors mean one school-wide strategy will not meet the needs of all unique learners, making school efforts potentially ineffective for most. The researcher is unable to determine if Dumas’s findings are applicable to all participants in this study as participants described both individual and school-based factors contributing to their overall connectedness to school. Literature lacks in the area of understanding effort versus value

perceptions regarding education for secondary students and is a recommendation for future studies to explore.

Limitations

Karcher (2001) included four major ecological domains related to adolescent connectedness: friends, school, parents, and self. The results of this study strongly support what literature (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Churchill et al., 2021; Daily et al., 2020) and The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2005) suggest the researcher would find through inductive coding except for the parent domain. The researcher did not include interview questions that would elicit enough data related to the parent domain to present any significant findings. While some assumptions could be made based on some participant responses, the researcher did not find enough data to provide a strong results section related to the impact of parents on participants' perception of education or their experience in education.

A limitation of this study is the lack of demographic delimitators. The researcher chose not to analyze data through different student demographics such as race, gender, lunch status, etc. so the results of this study should be considered more generally when working with adolescents in the school environment. Future research should study the phenomenon of in-school truancy to determine how differing student demographics perceive contributing factors to school connectedness. Future research should explore what relationship exists between socio-economic status and feelings of connectedness at school. Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 (Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Gennetian et al., 2018) suggests students who qualify for free or reduced lunch are more likely to experience an increase in school absenteeism, but this study did not explore those findings.

A further limitation of this study was the lack of being a longitudinal study. These one-time interviews captured a snapshot into participants' lives at that moment in time. However, if interviews were conducted more than once, over a longer time frame, participants may have recalled additional experiences that may have impacted the overall findings of the study. Participants were also students enrolled at a single high school that may not be reflective of other high schools across the United States based on size and location.

A limitation of this study was the potential bias of the researcher. The researcher had a personal connection with each study participant due to the professional role of being a school administrator. This role may have led the researcher to interpret interview responses differently compared to a researcher who does not know the participants or work as closely with the phenomenon that was studied. This bias would most likely surface in the inductive coding process as the researcher could have a bias towards the meaning behind certain terms or responses. Although the researcher completed the member-checking process for validity reasons, another researcher could interpret interview data differently.

Implications

This study contributed to the field of research as data is current for emerging student needs. Additionally, this study was conducted in a post-COVID world where the implications of COVID-19 are still being discovered within education and adolescent development. This study provides education stakeholders updated and current insights on what contributing factors students perceive support and hurt their sense of connectedness to school. Future research that seeks to understand connectedness for differing student demographics will be impactful as schools serve and support a variety of different student demographics.

This study also provided qualitative data to the issue of in-school truancy, which traditionally is measured by quantitative attendance data in nature. Understanding lived experiences of students is critical in understanding their attendance behavior as highlighted by quantitative attendance data. By ignoring or missing the qualitative data of a student's lived experience, school interventions and resources may be ineffective in addressing in-school truancy.

From the theoretical standpoint of adolescent connectedness, this study confirmed that adolescents have a desire to feel connected and are influenced by a variety of factors. This study focused solely on the four major ecological domains and not the fifteen subscales. While this study strongly confirmed the impact of three out of the four major domains, and loosely the fourth domain, this study did not explore each individual fifteen subscales such as siblings, reading, or romantic partner.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to understand the lived experience of secondary students to identify contributing factors of school connectedness. With an epistemological approach of subjectivism, students explained their experiences through narratives with the goal “to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied” allowing participants to “construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Based on findings from this study, the researcher has a list of recommendations for future research, which include:

- Understanding the impact of child-parent relationships on student perceptions of education is an important, as described by Van Den Berghe et al. (2022). Future research should seek to understand those relationships.

- Literature on truancy lacks understanding effort versus value perceptions regarding education for secondary students and is a recommendation for future studies to explore.
- Participants in this study appear to appreciate supportive staff. Literature confirms that a positive student-teacher relationship is impactful on student outcomes. Future studies should explore contributing factors that result in students feeling safe around their teachers to provide current recommendations for school staff.
- This study did not delineate data based on student demographics. Future studies should explore emerging issues related to in-school truancy and school belonging for students with differing student demographics. Results from these future studies will provide schools with more specific data to guide policies and resources to more directly support student needs within their school environment.

Conclusion

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to examine which factors along a student's educational journey have impacted their behavior to skipping classes while attending school. Participants were identified based on having the highest number of in-school truants, or in other words, skipped the most classes while being at school in one semester. All participants were recruited from the same large, public high school in the Midwest. All interviews were conducted in an office on campus, conducted face-to-face, and recorded using Zoom for transcription purposes. Upon IRB approval, the researcher reviewed the school's attendance data to identify potential participants. Once potential participants were identified, the researcher contacted the parent/guardian of each participant via phone to introduce the study and then emailed the consent form to be signed. This resulted in seven participants receiving signed

consent to participate in the study. Assent was read to each participant at the beginning of the interview, which the participant was able to schedule with the researcher.

Using thematic analysis, the researcher identified themes from the data and reported the results in Chapter 4. The researcher utilized both deductive and inductive coding. First, the researcher used deductive coding based on the four ecological domains presented in the theoretical framework. Then, the researcher analyzed data again without using priori codes and identified two emerging themes. Interview questions were designed to elicit personal narratives connected to all four ecological domains within *The Hemmingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness*. The results of this study highlighted both positive and negative contributing factors to the participants' perceived sense of belonging in school resulting in truancy.

The research question that this study attempted to answer was RQ1: What are the experiences of secondary students identified as in-school truant and their perceived contributing factors to truancy? This question was the focus of the study and resulted in six themes being derived: friends, school, parents, self, lack of control, and effort vs. value perception. This study could be used to expand our understanding of what factors impact a student's sense of belonging as early as kindergarten. Educators have a challenging role as they are tasked with teaching content, supporting the social-emotional needs of students, and ensuring a safe environment for all. However, this study highlighted just how impactful positive teacher-student relationships are for students of all ages and should remain a top priority within schools. Building in opportunities for students to perceive a higher sense of control, particularly those who are exhibiting feelings of being unsafe or unsupported, would be a recommendation based on the results of this study.

Statement of Professional Growth

Being part of the research in this study brought a lot of joy, appreciation, and reflection to the researcher. At the completion of each interview, the researcher asked the participant how it felt for them to go through the interview questions. All participants responded similarly, sharing that they appreciated having an opportunity for someone to ask about their life story and having a space where someone would listen. The researcher was moved by this consistent response and was reminded of just how important it is for adolescents to have space to use their voice and be heard. Participants in this study, in particular, struggle complying with attendance expectations and are confronted regularly from staff when they are exhibiting truancy behavior. While addressing the behavior is important as the focus is on achieving positive academic outcomes, educators and school leaders should be cognizant of learning with students as they develop and providing opportunities for students to feel empowered. The researcher believes this approach will bridge the gap between compliance and trust with students exhibiting truancy behaviors.

Results from this study indicate high school students feel a desire to have positive student-teacher relationships. The researcher will explore what opportunities exist within the high school environment to create more ways for students to connect positively with staff. Participants in this study commented on attributes such as kindness, patience, and approachability for their favorite teachers and made no remarks about content or curriculum. This prompts the researcher to consider opportunities for students and teachers to build positive rapport without any connection to content. Examples may include increasing student involvement in activities, a mentorship program, advisory, or a field day where the school community connects over activities that focus solely on relationship building. Rather than the

researcher brainstorming solutions, this study is a reminder that students have ideas and should be considered when making decisions.

The researcher learned a lot about what participants with high rates of in-school truancy perceive as being positive and negative factors that have impacted them since kindergarten. This is exactly what he wanted to get out of his project. While the themes and results presented in chapter four are valid and insightful, the researcher continues to think about how participants felt simply answering questions about their lived experiences. The researcher will continue considering the following as he works with students:

- How can student voices be elevated within the school setting?
- How can students have an increased perceived sense of control within the school setting?

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APPENDIX A: Implied Consent Form

You are being invited to provide consent as the legal guardian of your child, who is being invited to participate in a research project conducted by Mr. Joshua Andres, doctoral student, and Dr. Kristen Carlson, professor, at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Study Title: Understanding Experiences of Students Identified as In-School Truant and Their Sense of Belonging at School: When and What Caused the Disconnection.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to explore what factors have impacted a student's desire to attend school and how these factors have impacted their sense of school belonging.

What you Will Do in the Study: Your child will participate in a semi-structured interview with eight questions relating to their sense of school belonging, beliefs about school attendance, and where in their public education journey they felt like attending school was no longer possible or worthwhile.

Why and How Subjects were Selected: Your child was selected for this study as they met the attendance criteria for this study. The attendance criteria is a student who is identified as being chronically absent, or missing 10% or more of school.

Time Required: Your child will participate in one semi-structured interview, which will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

Risks: By deciding to participate in this study, your child is at no more than minimal risk of harm. The questions presented in the interview may slightly increase their current level of stress as they reflect on their school experiences. If an increase in stress level is observed, your child will be referred to their school counselor for additional support.

Benefits: If you approve your child participating in this study, and your child participates in the study, the findings may provide new guidance for educational leaders to make necessary changes within the educational system to help increase school belonging and attendance rates for future students.

Use of Data: The information that is collected will be aggregated without identifiers. Knowledge from this research may be disseminated by publication and/or presentation to improve understanding related to feelings of school belonging and attendance rates for students.

Confidentiality: Any information that you provide will be collected in a method in which your identity will be protected. Students will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their personal identity and legal name. The survey results will be reviewed by the research team. The aggregated data from these surveys may be published or presented. However, no individual participant information will be disclosed to protect the identity of the individual participants. All information collected will be anonymous.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your approval permitting your child to participate in this survey is voluntary. Refusal to participate or subsequent withdrawal does not result in penalty. You and/or your child can refuse to participate at any time.

Contact Info: If you have any questions about the research project, please contact Mr. Joshua Andres at 701-446-2499 or email at Joshua.andres@mnstate.edu or Dr. Kristen Carlson at Kristen.carlson@mnstate.edu. The Minnesota State University Moorhead Institutional Review Board has reviewed our request to conduct this project.

Whom to contact about your rights: Any questions about your rights as a research subject or if you have any concerns/complaints about the research, you may contact Robert Nava, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-4308 or by email at: robert.nava@mnstate.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Mr. Joshua Andres

Dr. Kristen Carlson

Please provide your signature, and the date of signing, to provide approval for your child to participate in this study.

The name of your child: _____

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B: Assent for Minor Participant

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our research project about your experiences with feeling connected to your school and how these experiences have impacted your desire or ability to attend school. Your responses will give us insight into how school leaders should improve best practices or policies to better support students. We will be recording this interview so that the interview can be transcribed into words. It is important to capture the conversation, so we have the correct information to analyze later. Please remember, your identity will be kept confidential and no one at this school or the school district will know you are participating. Once the interview is transcribed, all identifying information will be redacted before the interview is analyzed. We will also use a pseudonym, or a fake name, to take extra steps to assure you remain anonymous in the study. We are conducting individual interviews with other students as well. Information will only be shared in an aggregated form at the end of the project. This means the insights you provide will only be shared with others once all the interviews have occurred, we have analyzed all the information through the data analysis process, removed your identifying information, and finished the project.

You may decline to answer any questions during this conversation. Later, if there is any information you'd prefer we not include in the data analysis, you can contact me to have that information removed.

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

Prompting questions will only be used when the participant is feeling stuck, unable to elaborate or articulate on the initial question, or needs additional scaffolding to provide deeper context.

Q1. What was school like for you when you were younger, such as kindergarten or first grade?

- Prompting question: What do you remember about elementary school?
- Prompting question: Are there any teachers, adults, or friends that stick out to you?
- Prompting question: What was the most challenging part of elementary school?

Q2. How do you feel when you are at school now that you are older?

- Prompting question: What leads you to feel this way?
- Prompting question: How has your feelings about school shifted since you were younger?
- Prompting question: Do you feel like you can be successful at school? Why or why not?

Q3. What are some of your favorite memories about school?

- Prompting question: Why is this your favorite memory?
- Prompting question: How did this experience impact you?

Q4. Tell me about a time when you did not feel safe or supported at school?

- Prompting question: Who was involved in this incident? Were they supportive of your needs?

- Prompting question: If you could go back in time to that very moment with a superpower of any kind, what type of superpower would you want? How would that superpower change the outcome for you?

Q5. How do you think that experience has impacted you now that you are older?

- Prompting question: How about 10 years from now?
- Prompting question: What skills or knowledge have you gained since that experience?

Q6. If you choose to skip class or school, what are you usually doing instead?

- Prompting question: What do you get from this preferred activity that you do not get at school or in class?
- Prompting question: If you skip school, do you usually skip alone or with someone else?
- Prompting question: Do your closest friends tend to miss school?
- Prompting question: Do your teachers or other classmates notice when you miss school or class?

Q7. What is one thing you wish you could change about school?

- Prompting question: What is unfair about school?
- Prompting question: How hard is classwork for you?

Q8. What advice would you give to your younger self?

- Prompting question: What advice would you give to your older self?

APPENDIX D: IRB Approval Letter

Institutional Review Board



DATE: November 22, 2023

TO: Kristen Carlson, EdD, Principal Investigator
Joshua Andres, Co-investigator

FROM: Dr. Robert Nava, Chair
Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

ACTION: APPROVED

PROJECT TITLE: [2070403-1] Relationship Between In-School Attendance and Sense of School Belonging for High School Students: When and What Caused The Disconnection

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

APPROVAL DATE: November 22, 2023

EXPIRATION DATE:

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .