AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A MULTI-MODAL
ATTENDANCE PROGRAM: PERCEPTIONS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES BY TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perceptions and experiences of teachers and administrators in delivering a multi-modal attendance program aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism through student engagement practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants, three administrators and three teachers, at a public elementary school in a suburban setting. The purpose of the interview-directed questions was to better understand the shared experiences of teachers and administrators in their delivery of the programming. Questions were specific to the participant’s role working with students identified as chronically absent, how leadership relates to the implementation of the school’s attendance program, and opportunities offered for professional development regarding absenteeism. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to frame the three research questions and data analysis process. The theoretical framework, distributed leadership (DL), was used as a lens to better understand the perceptions and experiences of teachers and administrators. The four most prevalent and consistent findings revealed from the interviews were the perceived importance of connectedness between student and school community, the importance of communication and collaboration between all stakeholders in addressing the needs of students who are chronically absent, the use of multiple interventions, as opposed to one singular intervention, and the issue of control and the observed finding that teachers and administrators cannot control all aspects of a student’s attendance. The multi-modal programming, executed using a distributed leadership model, was effective as demonstrated by lower absentee rates than projected after one year of program implementation at the research site.

Keywords: chronic absenteeism, truancy, distributed leadership, school connectedness, multi-modal program
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Purpose of the Study

Student truancy and chronic absenteeism are complex problems at the K-12 level that have significant implications to both the student and society. Poor or limited behavioral or social engagement is a primary cause of chronic absenteeism (defined as unauthorized absences for 10% or more of school days in a year; Balfanz, 2016; De Witte & Csillag, 2014). Causation has also been attributed to chronic illness, emotional factors including perception of the learning environment and mental health status (Simoes & Alarcao, 2014; Sugrue, Zuel, & Laliberte, 2016). Multiple researchers have examined the relationships between chronic truancy and the following outcomes: early drop-out rates, subsequent engagement in delinquent activities, unemployment, and antisocial activities including gang membership, and substance abuse (Archambault, Kennedy, & Bender, 2013; Li et al., 2012; Sugrue, Zuel, & Laliberte, 2016; Tomori, Zalar, Plesnicar, Zihlrl, & Stergar, 2001).

Inclusion of adult volunteers in school-based mentoring programs (SBMs) has been shown to be an effective interventional method to improve school engagement, thereby reducing absenteeism rates of both elementary and middle school students (McQuillin & Lyons, 2016). In addition to employing volunteer mentors, schools are encouraged to use a multi-modal approach, which involve multiple interventions to combat student absenteeism. Each intervention addresses the problem from a different perspective and is a product of strong school leadership practices (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011). In-school approaches (e.g., student recognition for student attendance) and external approaches (e.g., mentoring and Parent Teacher Organization-sponsored events) involve multiple stakeholders. Use of a multi-modal approach is underexplored in the
literature (Balfanz, 2016; Freeman et al., 2015; Sälzer et al., 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological research study is to examine how elementary teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement.

**Statement of the Problem**

An early predictor of chronic truancy is a students’ level of connectedness with their teacher and the school community (Ang et al., 2015, Ekstrand, 2015). SBMs designed to identify causes of and subsequently address the lack of connectiveness between student and school have been shown to improve student attendance rates (Gordon, Downey, & Banger, 2013; McQuillin & Lyons, 2016; Simoes & Alarcao, 2014). Moreover, such programs have demonstrated that the student’s level of social engagement is a primary determinant in his/her ability to meet academic and behavioral expectations. As described in the literature, these SBMs have been conducted during school hours or after school and have involved teachers, administrators and community-based volunteers paired with at-risk students with the goal of student outreach (McQuillin & Lyons, 2016). Although these SBMs have been shown to positively influence the social development of students with low attendance rates, methods to improve student connectedness through integration of internal and external volunteer mentoring programs are currently underexplored (Freeman et al., 2015; Sälzer et al., 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In particular, the role of school leadership in the oversight and execution of these programs has been underemphasized. An under-reported aspect in this research area is the interplay between the primary stakeholders, namely the teachers and administrators who design, execute and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011).
Therefore, this study seeks to examine how teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement.

**Significance of the Research Questions**

This research extended previous research related to the enhancement of school engagement using multi-modal programming and SBMs. Previous research has shown volunteer SBM programs improve cognitive performance and improve social and behavioral engagement (Coller & Kuo, 2014; Gordon et al., 2013; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Simoes & Alarcao, 2014; Strapp et al., 2014; Volkmann & Bye, 2006). Social engagement and connectedness have been defined as the outward expression of positive feelings between mentee and mentor (Gordon et al., 2013). Domains of connectedness to neighborhood, friends, school, teacher and self-in-the-present have shown improvement from volunteer-based programs (Gordon et al., 2013). Such programming has demonstrated a relationship between improved connectedness and reduced absence rates (Ang et al., 2015; Ekstrand, 2015).

As public-school teachers, this research is significant in the sense that many students struggle with low attendance rates due to varied causes including home life issues, lack of social engagement, and lack of connectedness to the school community. This research may be significant for administrators in terms of addressing ways in which to combat chronic absenteeism. Considering these varied causes, no single approach can be applied to address the problem of absenteeism. Addressing the problem of school absenteeism requires scrutiny of the interrelationships between family, school administrators, students, teachers, and volunteers and a multi-modal approach to the design of SBM programming.
The aforementioned research supports the existence of a complex relationship between chronic absenteeism, school engagement, and the social development of the student. Subsequently conducted studies extended on this research by identifying multiple strategies by which to develop student self-esteem and sense of community (Ayton & Joss, 2016; Evans & Cowell, 2013; Kearney and Graczyk, 2013; Williams, Barnes, Holman, & Hunt, 2014). As demonstrated in previous work, markers of improved school and social engagement have been shown to positively influence attendance rates. In all countries, improved school engagement aids in the development of citizens who become more socially engaged in the larger community (Asiyai, 2014; Evans & Cowell, 2013; Gardella, Tanner-Smith, & Fisher, 2016). To date, limited research exists regarding use of a combination of strategies, referred to as multi-modal models, aimed at improving student connectedness, particularly in elementary school students (Balfanz, 2016; Benoliel, 2015; Freeman et al., 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Wange & Holcombe, 2010). This research extends on previous studies of multi-modal programs that address chronic absenteeism. The focus of this research is on the role of leadership and the collaboration between administrators and teachers in the design, execution, and evaluation of a multi-modal program that focuses on improving student connectedness.

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions and experiences of both administrators and teachers in the implementation of a multi-modal program designed to address student absenteeism. Specifically, this research explored the experiences of teachers and administrators using semi-structured interviews. The following central questions were addressed with three elementary teachers (grades kindergarten, three, and four) and three elementary
administrators (principal, assistant principal, and special education building administrator) at a public elementary school.

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

2. What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

3. What commonalities can be found between the experiences and perceptions of administrators and the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

**Definition of Key Terminology**

- **Change Agent**- Individual or group that assumes responsibility for initiating and leading change within an organization (Lunenburg, 2010)

- **Chronic Absenteeism**- Unauthorized absences for 10% or more of school days (Balfanz, 2016; De Witte & Csillag, 2014)

- **Multi-modal program**- Programming that involves multiple approaches to the same problem

- **School-based mentoring (SBM)**– Intervention that is defined by specific features including operation on school campus, inclusion of mentoring relationship, referral by teachers, counselors or other staff, and not simply a tutoring program (Jucovy, 2000)
- **Social engagement and connectedness** - The outward expression of positive feelings between mentee and mentor (Gordon et al., 2013).

In the following section of this chapter, the theoretical framework, distributed leadership, will be discussed.

**Theoretical Framework**

Distributed leadership (DL) surfaced in the early 2000s as a theoretical and analytical framework for studying school leadership. Heavily influenced by Wenger’s communities of practice, distributed cognition, and activity theory, the basis of DL theory lies in the “shift of focus from school principals…and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that give form to leadership practice” (Spillane, 2006, p. 3) and the idea that leadership is stretched across “social and situational contexts” (Spillane, 2001, p. 30). The collective interactions between leaders, followers, and their situation are principal elements of the DL theory. Of great importance to the DL perspective is that, “leadership practice is the central and anchoring concern, leadership practice is generated in the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation; each element is essential for leadership practice,” and “the situation both defines leadership practice and is defined through leadership practice.” (Spillane, 2006, p. 4). Although leadership definitions up until the 1990s were frequently associated with effectiveness or outcomes of an individual, DL is focused on interaction among leaders, followers, and their situation because leading organizations require many leaders (Spillane, 2006). The leader-plus aspect of the DL theory asserts that DL encompasses the work of all individuals involved in leadership practice. Figure 1.1 shows the interactions between leaders, followers and their situation and the importance of time in terms of how interactions are
connected with one another. Instead of a focus on *if* leadership is distributed, the focus shifts to *how* leadership is distributed. Leadership is a procedure, as opposed to an activity that involves how change agents collaborate to improve teaching and learning (Spillane, 2006).

![Figure 1. Leadership Practice from a Distributed Perspective (Spillane, 2006, figure 1.1.; reproduced with permission)](image)

**Critics of Theory**

Critics of DL argue that conceptual confusion may exist regarding the interchangeability of definitions and understanding of the theory. According to Harris & Spillane (2008), there is concern that the term DL may be perceived as a “catch all” term that reflects any form of shared or dispersed leadership rather than being identified as a specific leadership approach. Harris and Spillane (2008) further contest that tension between theoretical and practical interpretations exists in DL. The effects of the theory and its applications are considered underexplored (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Because much of the literature is normative regarding the view that distribution improves practice, Bolden (2011) comments that DL theorists should more thoroughly engage with the literature. Further, Bolden (2011) asserts that DL theory does not adequately consider the elements of power and influence in the context of leadership (Bolden,
Bolden (2011) contends that studies can be confined within organizational boundaries and can be focused on holders of formal positions within work on DL. Finally, although there is literature that supports the social construction of leadership, DL theory does not generally question the existence of leadership as a distinct concept (Bolden, 2011).

**Justification for Theoretical Framework**

Addressing chronic absenteeism in public schools requires transformation and the involvement of change agents who first recognize the significance of the issue, then develop the willingness to investigate and discuss ways to address the issue. It is well recognized that instituting change within an organization requires strong leadership (Raelin, 2016; Spillane, 2006). In order to change absenteeism rates, educators must recognize that students are more likely to want to attend school when they feel connected to the learning community with adults who support them (Ang et al., 2015; Ekstrand, 2015). Likewise, faculty/staff are more likely to connect with students when they feel a sense of support from one another and from the administrators in their building (Ekstrand, 2015). Thus, the leadership model employed by a school’s administration has far reaching implications on faculty, staff and student connectedness with the learning community and, ultimately, on student truancy. At present, there is no research to support that one specific leadership model is more effective than another in facilitating improved student attendance rates. Current research contends that both distributive and translational leadership foster team effectiveness (Spillane, 2006).

DL theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because a multi-modal program requires collaboration and interaction between multiple stakeholders in addition to strong administrative oversight. Successful execution of a multi-modal program relies on the
provision of varied programming with delegation of responsibility and accountability to a team of educators. When the focus of leadership shifts from one professional in charge to a team of professionals sharing ideas and maximizing each other’s potential, leadership can be impactful and meaningful (Spillane, 2006). Spillane (2006) asserts that the basis of the DL model is not simply delegating responsibilities but identifying each group member’s individual strengths and collaborating as a team. As stated by Drago-Severson (2009), leadership practices that support adult growth not only facilitate ways of learning and working together but also improve the formatting and execution of professional learning initiatives. Leaders who participate in open dialogue, share opinions, and brainstorm collaboratively can become strong change agents within an organization. In order to effectively facilitate this type of leadership, adults need to understand and recognize each other’s learning styles, ways of knowing, and varying perspectives. As asserted by Drago-Severson (2012), educational leaders nationwide should search for ways to best support the development of adults and children in the learning environment. In addition to educators understanding the children with whom they work, it is also of great importance for educators to understand the motivations, goals and aspirations of their colleagues.

Use of a leadership model that centers on adult learning and growth can be successful in bridging the gap between researchers and practitioners (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). By considering the complimentary motivations of each member of the learning community (i.e., researcher and practitioner), true collaboration is more likely to be achieved through deliberation and translation of group findings with incorporation of such findings into practice (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Approaching the issue of absenteeism through a distributed leadership lens
can better identify the inter-relationships between the multiple stakeholders in their delivery of the program.

**Use of Theoretical Framework**

I used DL theory as a lens to examine the effectiveness of a multi-modal program designed to improve rates of chronic absenteeism. By applying this theoretical framework, I aimed to determine if the chosen approach to institutional leadership was a factor in the success of the program. Because the research question of this study focuses on teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the use of a multi-modal school attendance program, the interview questions were reflective of how actors worked together to shape and make use of the program in the school.

**Conclusion**

This study explored how teachers and administrators collaborate to provide a multi-modal approach to addressing chronic absenteeism in elementary-aged students. Such multi-modal approaches involve a variety of change agents within and outside the organization and leaders, specifically school principals, who are instrumental in setting the tone for school culture (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011). Application of DL theory allowed for the determination of the effect of institutional leadership methods on program success. Application of this theory allowed me to identify if there is a relationship between a method of institutional leadership and program effectiveness. The DL framework was chosen because it is based on the premise that leadership is a social phenomenon, rather than a set of traits representative of one individual in power. This framework is applicable to research of multi-modal programs because such programs require a group of individuals with varying traits, open dialogue, and collective visioning.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason (Balfanz, 2016), whereas truancy is a pattern of extended absence for unexcused reasons (Attendance Works, 2014). Both absenteeism and truancy are influenced by many factors, including but not limited to: the student’s perception of school, school funding, parental involvement, and the role of the district. In particular, improvements in the student’s school engagement have been shown to improve truancy (De Witte & Csillag, 2014). This literature review will first examine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and social maladjustment (i.e., ongoing pattern of failure to respect societal norms) then explore the underlying causes of truancy and chronic absenteeism. Lastly, the effect of leadership practices specifically regarding the relationship between the usage of mentoring programs and school engagement in K-12 students will be examined. The summarized studies were obtained through searching of two databases, EBSCOhost and ERIC.

Truancy as a Health Concern

Truancy has been shown to cause early drop-out and delinquent behavior; it is associated with teenage pregnancy, gang-membership, poorly-developed social skills, and substance abuse (Ang, Huan, Chan, Cheoung, & Leaw, 2015; De Witte & Csillag, 2014; Ekstrand, 2015; Gong, Zu, & Han, 2016; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; McDermott, Rikoon, & Fantuzzo, 2015; Snyder, Lee-Partridge, Jarmoszko, Petkova, & D’Onofrio, 2014). The following review will address the effects of truancy on later development of students with attention to engagement in delinquent activities, substance abuse, and early drop-out.

Delinquent Activity
In studies of student behavior, delinquency has been defined as including the following activities: selling drugs, stealing, serious fighting (including assault) in and out of school, vandalism, having a police record, and bullying (Li et al., 2011; Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). A primary trigger for delinquent behavior is truancy. A number of studies have examined whether school engagement including school attendance is preventative of adolescent delinquency (Ang, et al., 2015; Archambault, et al., 2013; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004; Vaughn, et al., 2013).

Loeber and Farrington (2000) described a prevalence of child delinquency of approximately 10% in the age group of ten to 12 years, regardless of gender. Three developmental pathways leading to disruptive and delinquent behavior were identified: an overt pathway (i.e., minor aggression), a covert pathway (i.e., minor covert behaviors prior to age 15), and an authoritative pathway. The latter pathway consists of a series of stubborn behaviors including truancy, defiance, and running away (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Although studies support that there is no single risk factor to explain delinquent behavior, progression down an authoritative conflict pathway and disinterest in school increases the overall risk of violent offenses (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). This paper, summarizing the report of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Study Group on Very Young Offenders, provides a comprehensive review of the multiple risk factors for delinquent activity in youth, and it well supports that truancy and school disengagement are established risk factors (Loeber & Farrington, 2000).

Li and colleagues (2011) conducted a seven-year longitudinal study to determine whether behavioral and emotional school engagement was predictive of the risks for substance abuse and
delinquency in children in grades five through eleven (Li et al., 2011). A total of 6,864 adolescents and their parents participated in the study. The adolescents were enrolled in waves, starting with those in fifth grade, then introducing additional students from sixth grade and seventh grade into the cohort. Once enrolled, students were distributed packets of information to be completed by parents, and they also completed a questionnaire to assess their level of school engagement. Behavioral engagement was assessed based on a four-item analysis from the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (PSLAB) tool. Behaviors included completing homework and going to school with books or writing instruments. Emotional engagement was also assessed based on the PSLAB tool and involved a three-item analysis of measures of caring (i.e., “I care about school,” “students care about me,” “the teacher cares about me”). Delinquency was measured via self-reports and parent-reports via questionnaire. Results indicated the rate of delinquency increased over time and peaked in the early high school years. An inverse relationship was found between both types of engagement and the time to initiating a delinquent behavior. Results illustrate how poor attachment to school increases the risk of health-compromising activities. Since poor attachment has been associated with truancy in this population, the relationship between truancy and delinquent behavior can be made (Li et al., 2011).

Ang and colleagues (2015) explored a number of potential risk factors for youth gang membership with 1,027 Singaporean adolescent participants. Delinquency, proactive aggression, psychopathy and lack of behavioral school engagement have all been implicated as risk factors for gang membership. Researchers argue that truancy and absenteeism result from lack of school engagement, and the future implications of truancy are delinquency including gang
membership (Ang et. al, 2015). The adolescents in this study were in grades seven through nine and were enrolled in three different middle schools. A 19-item school engagement measure (SEM) was used to assess cognitive, social and behavioral engagement. Students completed the assessments using a questionnaire, and the participation rate was 85%. Based on a logistic regression model, three of seven predictors reliably influenced the risk of youth gang membership. Delinquency increased the likelihood of youth gang membership by 15%, proactive aggression increased the risk by 20%, and behavioral school engagement reduced the risk by 16%. This study supports that disengagement from school with associated truancy is associated with youth gang membership, as determined in a large group of adolescents. When students feel disconnected from their teacher, fellow students and school environment, they are more apt to get involved in antisocial activities such as substance abuse, delinquency and gang membership (Ang, et al., 2015).

**Rate of Early Drop-Outs**

According to a research report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), in the United States, the status drop-out rate from 1990 to 2014 decreased from 12.1% to 6.5% for students ages 16-24. There are serious consequences to dropping out of school for both society and the individual. Drop-outs are more likely to have mental health problems, engage in delinquent activities, and to be recipients of unemployment insurance. Studies have examined the relationship between chronic truancy and early drop-out (De Witte & Csillag, 2014; Ekstrand, 2015)

An administrative dataset in Amsterdam allowed for student tracking based on gender, parental information, location and size of the school, school track (vocational, general or pre-
university) and truancy rate (De Witte & Csillag, 2014). Truancy was defined as an unexcused absence for more than three days. Using least squares regression analyses, a positive and significant correlation was found between truancy and early drop-outs. The study sample was all students between the ages of 13 and 17 enrolled in 114 schools in the city of Amsterdam. In a given year, the average drop-out rate was 4.1%. Truants were found to have a 3.4 percent higher risk of leaving school without a qualification. Males, students living in a poverty area, and those of Surinamese ethnicity had a higher probability of truancy. Students with improvement in their truancy rates had significantly reduced drop-out rates by five percent. This study further supports the relationship between truancy and early school drop outs (De Witte & Csillag, 2014).

Ekstrand’s (2015) comprehensive literature review inspected 155 peer-reviewed research articles, 72 of which were published in the United States. Research questions of the reviewed studies focused on truancy, absenteeism, and drop-out rates. Ekstrand (2015) concluded that there was a complex relationship between truancy and early drop-out. She further suggested that the teacher-student relationship (i.e., the bond that students form with their teacher) was at the core of school engagement, school attendance, and prevention of dropout. Ekstrand’s (2015) comprehensive literature review further supports that chronic truancy increases the risk of later delinquency, low academic performance, and lower overall psychosocial health status.

**Conclusion**

There are serious implications to chronic truancy. Ekstrand (2015) noted that complex relationships exist between absenteeism, chronic truancy, early drop-out rates and delinquency. Studies have shown that improved behavioral and emotional school engagement significantly lower risks of truancy and resultant delinquent activities and substance abuse (Li et al., 2011;
Vaughn et al., 2015). As such, future research is warranted on the initiation of intervention programs to improve attendance rates and thereby improve later social development of students.

Recognized Contributing Factors to Absenteeism

Causes of absenteeism are numerous and can be categorized as physical factors (illness, obesity, injury), psychosocial factors (socioeconomic status, homelessness, overexposure to television, parental issues), and emotional factors (mental health, perception of learning environment, lack of connectedness (Archambault, et al., 2013; Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013; Hancock, Lawrence, Shepherd, Mitrou, & Zubrick, 2017; Hansen, Pritchard, Melnic, & Zhang, 2016; Howland, Chen, Chen, & Min; 2017; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012; Li et al., 2012; Psaki, Mensch, & Soler-Hampejsek, 2017; Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014; Skedgell & Kearney, 2016; Sugrue, Zuel, & Laliberte, 2016; Tomori, Zalar, Plesnicar, Ziferl, & Stergar, 2001; Virtanen et al., 2009; Wang & Dishion, 2013). In a survey of 1,359 students with an average age of 15.1 years, Pflug and Schneider (2015) found that 43% of absences were due to illness, injury or special event. Absent students tended to be older, had lower family income, fewer family vehicles, fewer computers, and did not live with two parents. Higher scores on the survey reflecting emotional difficulty, problems with personal conduct, and total difficulties were observed in the absent students (Pflug & Schneider, 2015). In recent years, the extent of screen time (television viewing and computer use) has also been raised as a potential contributing factor to absenteeism (Hansen et al., 2016). In the following subsections, the physical, psychosocial, and emotional factors contributing to absenteeism will be summarized.
Physical Health and Absenteeism

Asthma. Asthma, the most common childhood disease, is the most frequent medical cause of student absenteeism (Tsakiris, 2013). According to Tsakiris et al.’s study, 55% of children with asthma are estimated to miss school days due to exacerbation of asthmatic symptoms (Tsakiris et al., 2013). In a cross-sectional study of 1,539 elementary and high school students, Tsakiris and colleagues (2013) intended to determine the impact of asthma on school attendance and school performance as reported by teachers and parents. Questionnaires were provided to parents of children enrolled in 98 schools in Greece (75 elementary and 23 high schools) to gather information on socioeconomic variables including gender, gestational age, smoking in the home, and diagnosis of asthma. School attendance and school performance were assessed for the last two years based on teacher reports. Of the eight to 16-year-olds represented in the sample, 262 (17%) had a diagnosis of asthma per parent report. Statistical tests included Chi squared for relative frequencies, and Mann-Whitney or Kruskal-Wallis test for continuous variables. Asthma severity (defined on the basis of hospitalizations or doctor visits) correlated directly with the number of absent days. School performance was significantly better in the students without asthma in the elementary school but not high school. Linear regression analysis revealed that asthmatic children have a lesser-odds (OR 0.64; p = 0.049) of an excellent school performance in elementary school. In the asthma group, school performance was related to use of inhalers; 81% of students who used inhalers had excellent performance versus 50% of those who did not use inhalers (p = 0.018). Overall, absenteeism was associated with poor school performance over the two-year time period regardless of asthma diagnosis. Lower parental education also correlated directly with low school performance. This study supports the results of prior studies linking
asthma to missed school days, and it also suggests an association between inhaler-controlled asthma and lower number of missed days (Tsakiris et al., 2013).

**Body Mass Index.** The relationship between body mass index (BMI) status and missed school days has gained the attention of the National Institutes of Health (Li et al., 2012). In the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey of 2005-2008, data were analyzed from 1,387 children and 2,185 adolescents. Increased body weight was found to be independently associated with severe student absenteeism in children but not adults. Severe school absenteeism was defined as 18 or more missed school days in the past 12 months. In children six to eleven years old, the prevalence of severe absenteeism was 1.57% in children of normal weight, and 4.94% in those defined as obese. The adjusted odds of severe school absenteeism were 2.27 among overweight children and 3.93 for obese children compared to normal weight children (p<0.01) (Li et al., 2012).

**Delayed sleep.** Misalignment of sleep, defined as excessive sleepiness and significant daytime impairment, is an additional physical factor that influences school attendance (Sivertsen et al., 2013). The prevalence of Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome (DSPS) was studied in 9,338 adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 in Sivertsen and colleagues’ 2013 study. Students completed a questionnaire specific to sleep pattern, self-reported bedtime and rise time, difficulty falling asleep and remaining asleep, symptoms of depression, and self-reported rates of student non-attendance. The calculated prevalence of DSPS was 3.3%, significantly higher in girls (3.7%) versus boys (2.7%). An overlap was observed in the diagnosis of insomnia; 54% of boys and 57% of girls with DSPS had a co-diagnosis of insomnia. In those with DSPS, the depressive scores were significantly higher (p<0.001) compared to students without DSPS. Students with
DSPS had a mean absence rate of 7.1 days and 15.4 hours versus 3.9 days and 7.2 hours in students without DSPS. The results of this study support a higher prevalence of DSPS in adolescents (3.3%) compared to the general population (0.17%). Disturbances in sleep pattern described by DSPS and insomnia were shown to significantly impact school attendance rates in adolescents (Sivertsen et al., 2013).

**Psychosocial Factors and Absenteeism**

A qualitative study of 15 caseworkers and eight supervisors involved in truancy intervention programs was conducted at nine community-based agencies (Sugrue et al., 2016). The intervention programs applied to students in grades kindergarten through five. Results were based on 13 semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions, conducted at each agency over a two-month period. Thematic analytic technique revealed the following key factors relating to chronic truancy: housing, transportation, mental health, substance abuse, family size, family conflict, child-teacher relationship, parent employment, poverty and cultural conflict. The components of the case-worker intervention program (i.e., referrals, support with routines, trust building, parent relationships) were found to be a good fit with the identified factors relating to truancy (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Excessive television viewing and screen-time have shown significant relationships with absenteeism in children and adolescents. Hansen and colleagues (2016) studied the relationships between school absenteeism and each of the following: physical activity, television viewing, and computer use. 1,048 children six to eleven years and 1,117 adolescents ages 12-18 were enrolled in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). Based on surveys completed by children or their caregivers, excessive television viewing (defined as greater than
two hours per day) had a significant association with severe absenteeism (i.e., missing two or more days per month). Physical inactivity showed a U-shaped curve, with medium levels of physical activity being associated with the least-missed days from school. Severe absenteeism was ten times more likely in physically inactive students compared to students with medium levels of activity. Daily computer usage activity (classified as normal if less than three hours a day and excessive if greater than or equal to three hours a day) did not show an association with absenteeism. This study supports the importance of retaining physical activity in the school curriculum and the need to work in partnership with parents to control television viewing time (Hansen et al., 2016).

Cigarette smoking has been linked to other risk-behaviors in adolescents, including school absences (Tomori et al., 2001). A cross-sectional study of 2,111 high school students was performed to identify psychosocial characteristics and risk behaviors associated with adolescent smoking. 460 students (22%) were self-described smokers with the majority being daily smokers. In girls, smokers were ten times more likely to have been inebriated with alcohol within the last month and seven times more likely to have used illicit drugs. Smokers were five times more likely to skip classes and be truant from school. Comparison of male smokers and male non-smokers revealed similar results. In a multivariate regression model, items that contributed most to the differentiation between smokers and non-smokers were attitude towards smoking as an unhealthy behavior, alcohol intoxication, use of illicit drugs, and skipping classes. (Tomori et al., 2001).
**Emotional Factors and Absenteeism**

As previously noted, depression in adolescence significantly correlates with absenteeism (Sivertsen et al., 2013). In adolescents, studies have been designed to determine the sociodemographic and mental health correlates with truancy (Gong et al., 2016; Sugrue et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2013). In a sample of 17,482 adolescents, the prevalence of skipping school in the last month was 11% (Vaughn et al., 2013). Correlates to truancy were summarized as older age, lower student engagement, less parental involvement, substance abuse, and lower grades. The high school students who were truant were three times more likely to report depression than those who did not skip school. Students identified as high-level truants were more likely to receive C and D grades or lower, and truant students were less engaged in school. Both social and behavioral engagement were identified as targets for future study to improve school attendance (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Students’ perceptions of the condition of their classroom and their level of connectedness with their teacher can influence absenteeism (Asiyai, 2014; Gardella, Tanner-Smith, & Fisher, 2016). In Asiyai’s (2014) study of a random sample of 800 students from 16 schools in Nigeria, a student-answered questionnaire was used to measure perception of the physical learning environment. Students attending urban schools had significantly higher scores (p<0.05) on their perception of the school environment. Results of the surveys also indicated that students felt that the learning environment would influence their personal behavior, readiness to learn, motivation to learn, and school attendance. Approximately 88% of students reported that the physical learning environment influenced their personal learning behavior and their absences from school. The physical condition of the classroom (e.g., the lighting, size, level of ventilation, and
perceived beauty) influenced the level of student learning and attendance. A student’s perception of safety in the classroom has also been considered as a contributing factor to absenteeism. In 2011, more than 5,000 participants in the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey were enrolled in a study to investigate the relationships between multiple victimization, academic achievement, and absenteeism. The 12-18-year-old participants completed a computer-assisted telephone interview and a personal interview. A path analysis model involving logistic regression was used to identify the relationship between the key variables. Higher odds of absenteeism were identified in the students who reported multiple victimizations, and absenteeism was found to be related to lower academic performance. The students’ perceptions of the safety of their environment influenced their attendance rate. Of the security measures studied, the presence of metal detectors and security guards was found to moderate the relationship between victimization and absenteeism. This study demonstrated that absenteeism is influenced by the type of safety measure employed by a school, and the student’s perception of safety (Gardella et al., 2016).

**Student-Teacher Relationship**

Multiple investigators have emphasized the importance of the student-teacher relationship as related to student attendance (Ang et al., 2015; Evans & Cowell, 2013; Gordon, Downey, & Banger, 2013; Sugrue et al, 2016). A sense of connectedness is frequently described as a crucial factor relating to absenteeism. One study in particular has examined how stress in teachers can influence absentee rates of both teachers and students (Evans & Cowell, 2013). Using a mixed methods design, the link between self-esteem, stress, and absenteeism was studied in both students and teachers. The sample included 26 schools in England, 18 of which
completed the entire year of study. Analysis of findings revealed that, after an intervention program was implemented, staff self-esteem increased significantly (p<0.05). The self-esteem of students between the ages of four and 11 also increased significantly. After implementation of the school improvement program, unauthorized student absences also decreased significantly (p<0.05). The results of this study suggest that the institution of programmatic change in a school can affect both staff and student self-esteem, and also influence absenteeism of staff and students. This study also suggests a strong relationship between teacher and student stress (Evans & Cowell, 2013).

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the causes of absenteeism in students are multiple. Physical health status, including chronic illness, physical activity, and physical injury, significantly influence absentee rates. Moreover, parental perception of physical health is an influencing factor. Psychosocial factors that increase the risk of truancy include socioeconomic status, family size and support systems, and extent of television viewing (Sälzer, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Stamm, 2012). The emotional health of students and their connection to the learning environment are highly influential factors. The importance of strengthening the teacher:student bond and school connectedness through volunteerism and improved teacher awareness will be discussed in the next section.

The Importance of School Programming

The effectiveness of mentoring and volunteer programs on student development has been measured on the basis of student connectedness, student attendance, and student academic performance. Volunteer programs may be conducted within the school hours, referred to as
school-based mentoring programs (SBMs), or offered after school or as home-based programs (McQuillin & Lyons, 2016). Typically, all programs are designed to foster relationships between adult mentors and students. Mentors focus on helping students with academic and real-life challenges. Multiple forms of school engagement have been studied relative to the introduction of mentoring programs.

In their theoretical paper, Kearney and Graczyk (2013) explored the application of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model to address the problem of student absenteeism. RtI is defined as a systematic and hierarchical decision-making process that targets interventions based on student need (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). In keeping with the multi-modal approach to addressing absenteeism, a variety of student interventions are used. Tier 1 interventions are universal in their application to students (e.g., common curriculum, routine screening of students), whereas Tier 2 interventions are targeted toward at-risk students and allow for the provision of additional support. Tier 3 interventions are directed toward students with complex or severe problems that require one-on-one instruction and frequent monitoring (e.g., weekly). With regard to addressing student absenteeism, Tier 1 interventions could include school-based health programs and social and emotional learning programs for all students. Tier 2 interventions would be directed to students who have been identified as having attendance issues. Such interventions would include collaboration with parents, social-workers or tutors. Employing peer mentors matched to at-risk students with a focus on enhancing social engagement would also constitute a Tier 2 intervention. More intense and individualized interventions would be needed for students with chronic absenteeism requiring a Tier 3 approach. The authors challenge educators to consider the RtI framework as a model for
addressing the pervasive problem of chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). In this section, the efficacy of various school programs on student engagement and the importance of leadership in enacting these school programs will be summarized.

**School-Based Mentoring Programs**

Behavioral, social, and cognitive engagement have individually or collectively been the focus of SBMs (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Numerous studies have shown that volunteer and mentoring programs may improve cognitive performance (e.g., math or reading scores); however, the dominant effect has been on improved social and behavioral engagement (Bernstein et al., 2015; Coller & Kuo, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2013; Green et al., 2012; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Simoes & Alarcao, 2014; Smith, Newman-Thomas, & Stormont, 2015; Strapp et al., 2014; Volkmann & Bye, 2006; Wong, O’Donnell, Bayliss, Fletcher, & Glauert, 2016). For example, the non-profit organization, *Thrive*, administered an SBM in sixth through tenth grade students in a small city in the Rocky Mountains district (Gordon et al., 2013). The SBM was designed to facilitate connectedness (defined as the outward expression of positive feelings between the mentee and the mentor) while providing academic and social support. Approximately once a week during the full academic year, the mentor met with the mentee for one hour to engage in reading, board games, working on homework, and conversation. 121 students were assigned to a treatment group; a control group of 235 students represented two different school districts. Six months after enrollment in the SBM, the mean numbers of both unexcused absences and discipline referrals were significantly lower in the treatment group compared to the control group (5.95 versus 18; p<0.001 and 1.52 versus 3.49; p<0.04), respectively. Effect sizes, used to
quantify the difference in outcomes between the treatment and control groups, were large to moderate for reductions in unexcused absences and very large for reductions in discipline referrals. Although improvements were observed in reading scores in the treatment group, the most benefit from the SBM was demonstrated by increases in ten domains of connectedness (to neighborhood, friends, parents, siblings, school, peers, teachers, reading, self-in-the-present, self-in-the-future). Students’ perceptions of connectedness related to self, family, school, and friends (Gordon et al., 2013).

The Check & Connect model has been used in elementary students to decrease disengagement, a primary indicator of school drop-out (Lehr et al., 2004). In a large Midwestern city, this program was employed in an attempt to improve low school attendance rates (i.e., absences of greater 12% of the time, based on a 12-month period). In the 147 students studied, the Check & Connect model promoted engagement of students in middle and high school in both suburban and urban settings. Absences or tardy rates dropped to or below five percent of the time. Moreover, 90% of the school staff (n=123) who referred these students reported that the students were more engaged. After two years of enrollment, a 28% reduction in the level of student disengagement was calculated. These results suggest that Check & Connect increases levels of engagement in school, as evidenced by substantial changes in attendance (Lehr et al., 2004).

School-based mentoring programs may be focused on a particular aspect of student life (Gregus, Craig, Rodriguez, Pastrana, & Cavell, 2015). For example, a lunch buddy mentoring program was described that focused on reducing the rate of peer victimization. Two consecutive studies explored the effects of lunch buddy mentoring by college students on student-based...
reports of peer victimization. In the first study, 24 fourth grade children were enrolled who had perceived risks of victimization. In study two, the 23 enrolled children were both victimized by peers and admittedly engaged in bullying. Mentors met twice weekly with mentees and were encouraged to promote a positive interaction with their mentee, enhancing their mentee’s social interactions with nearby lunch mates. The Lunch Buddy Harm Scale was used by both students and teachers to assess perceived harm from the lunch buddy program. In study one, significant reductions in the children’s self-reports of peer victimization, as well as teacher reports, were found after one semester of lunch buddy mentoring (p<0.05). In study two, teacher- and student-reported assessments of victimization were similarly reduced as in study one after three semesters of mentoring, but not after one semester. These results suggest that a focused mentoring program may allow for better social adjustment to the students’ environment (Gregus et al., 2015).

**After-School and Family Programs**

Participation in after-school programs has been associated with academic benefits, particularly in younger students (Brown & Lee, 2014; Springer & Diffily, 2012). Compared to school-based mentoring programs, participation in after-school programs is challenged by transportation issues and parental involvement. One after-school program that has showed substantial success is that organized by the Boys and Girls Club of America. 719 second through eighth graders who participated in the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Dallas were studied in 2012 (Springer & Diffily, 2012). Higher overall grade-point averages and lower absence rates were found in the participating elementary school students. Regression analyses revealed that, the greater the participation in the after-school program, the greater the increase in grade-point
average over the six-week study period. Using ANOVA, the students’ grade-point averages were significantly influenced by the intensity of the participation at the elementary and middle school level. This study is consistent with other studies of organized after-school programs in that elementary school students benefit academically more than middle school students (Springer & Diffily, 2012).

Mentoring programs can extend to involve the family rather than just the student. For example, the family mentoring program, Creating Opportunities and Casting Hope (COACH program), was designed for vulnerable parents (Ayton & Joss, 2016). The premise of this program is that interventions that improve the family environment will have positive influences on the child’s health and well-being. Mentors were instructed on how to empower families to set life goals, to improve communication skills, and to better address employment and housing difficulties. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 12 parents, 27 mentors, and 27 case report reviews were thematically analyzed to assess the program. The mentoring program allowed for improvements in participants’ self-esteem and ability to take risks to secure better housing or employment. This study provides qualitative data to support further study of home visiting programs that focus on at-risk children living in vulnerable families (Ayton & Joss, 2016).

**Multi-Modal Programming**

Although mentoring programs have been shown to improve school engagement, student enrollment in mentoring programs alone does not influence all components of chronic absenteeism. As previously described, absenteeism is influenced by students’ perception of the school environment and their cognitive performance (Sälzer et al., 2012). Wang and Holcombe
(2010) conducted a longitudinal study based on the premise that school engagement is a multidimensional construct composed of emotions, behaviors and cognitions. Using data from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study, 1,046 adolescents were recruited for participation in two rounds of face-to-face interviews and completion of self-administered questionnaires. A 14-item tool was used to assess the level of school engagement defined on the basis of school participation (a form of behavioral engagement), identification with school (a form of emotional engagement) and use of self-regulation strategies (a form of cognitive engagement). Structural equation modeling was used to examine the associations between the student’s perception of school environment, school engagement and their academic performance. Such modeling led to the identification that students’ perceptions of each element of student engagement in seventh grade influenced their levels of engagement in eighth grade. Beyond mentoring to improve student connectedness, the use of self-regulation strategies and reinforcement activities to decrease distraction improved student engagement. These findings suggest that there is a multidimensional construct of school engagement that needs to be considered when developing a school-based mentoring program (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

School-wide interventions and supports (SWPBIS) has been used as a multi-modal approach to improve student attendance rates. Core features of SWPBIS include the clear definition of school-wide expectations, providing differentiated support to students in need through mentoring, and supporting positive reinforcement for pro-social behaviors. A study using data from the National PBIS Center was performed to explore the link between use of SWPBIS aids and drop-out rates. The study sample included 883 high schools from 37 states and 934 middle schools. Results from the drop-out rate growth model revealed a trend in the
expected direction of lower drop-out rates for schools employing SWPBIS. Schools implementing SWPBIS with fidelity had higher attendance rates with lower associated drop-out rates per year. This study supports a relationship between implementation of SWPBIS and attendance rates and early drop-out in middle and high school students (Freeman et al., 2015).

**School Leadership**

Leadership is at the core of effective implementation of school programming and organizational change (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). As previously described, the cognitive, social and behavioral engagement of the student is achieved through establishing connectedness (Ang et al., 2015; Evans & Cowell, 2013; Gordon et al., 2013; Sugrue et al, 2016). This connectedness to school has been best achieved through a collaborative effort involving parent, volunteer, teacher and school administration (Gordon et al., 2013). Identifying best practice methods to improve student engagement typically involves the process of acquiring input from multiple stakeholders rather than an individual leader. It is through collective visioning and open dialogue among these parties and collaboration that the student in need develops a better sense of connectedness and community, thereby improving school attendance. Collective visioning, open dialogue, and shared goals are the pillars of distributed leadership.

To initiate change in an organization, the members of the leadership team need to share common goals and understanding of educational practice, participate in open-dialogue, routinely reflect on their role, and support one another’s way of knowing. Distributed leadership is based on the premise that leadership is a social phenomenon, rather than a set of traits representative of one individual in power (Spillane, 2006). The focus of leadership is shifted from what one individual can accomplish to what a group/ community can accomplish to achieve one well-
defined outcome. As Raelin (2015) commented, leadership focuses on a group doing the work-as opposed to one individual who makes the important decisions. In this sense, leadership is a collective, collaborative process that involves open dialogue and shared sense-making. By focusing on every-day practices, the group can make impactful change within the organization. Leaders, specifically school principals, are instrumental in setting tone for school culture (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011).

**Conclusion**

School-based mentoring programs, offered during school hours or after school hours, have been shown to positively influence cognitive, behavioral, and social development of elementary and middle school students (Bernstein et al., 2015; Coller & Kuo, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2013; Green et al., 2012; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Simoes & Alarcao, 2014; Smith, Newman-Thomas, & Stormont, 2015; Strapp et al., 2014; Volkmann & Bye, 2006; Wong, O’Donnell, Bayliss, Fletcher, & Glauert, 2016). Of note, elementary school students tend to benefit most from mentorship (Springer & Diffily, 2012). Although cognitive development has been the focus of some programs, improved social and behavioral engagement are the primary benefits of early mentoring programs. Such engagement has been associated with lower absentee rates. Recent data support the use of a multi-tiered student support and intervention systems to address the problem of chronic absenteeism through a multi-modal approach (Benoliel, 2015). The multi-modal approach includes the reinforcement of positive behaviors for all students, the inclusion of mentors, and specific interventions targeted toward at-risk students (Balfanz, 2016). As such, the use of the RtI model and other related tier-based models provide both global and individual
initiatives to reduce student absenteeism. In addition, the method of leadership may have implications on the success of the program.

**Summation**

This literature review supports the existence of a complex relationship between chronic absenteeism, school engagement, leadership, and the social development of the student. As summarized by Ekstrand (2015), there is no single reason for unauthorized absence from school. Absenteeism may be explained by a student's fear of failure, separation anxiety, illness, dislike of a subject, displeasure of the school climate, and/or a lack of bonding. Ample published research is available to support that poor school engagement leads to truancy and subsequent social issues including delinquency (Archambault, et al., 2013; Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013; Hancock, Lawrence, Shepherd, Mitrou, & Zubrick, 2017; Hansen, Pritchard, Melnic, & Zhang, 2016; Howland, Chen, Chen, & Min; 2017; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012; Li et al., 2012; Psaki, Mensch, & Soler-Hampejsek, 2017; Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014; Skedgell & Kearney, 2016; Sugrue, Zuel, & Laliberte, 2016; Tomori, et al., 2001; Virtanen et al., 2009; Wang & Dishion, 2013). School engagement has been described as behavioral, social, and cognitive (Ang, et al., 2015). In particular, the social and behavioral engagement of a student, described by many as the level of connectedness between students and their school and teacher, is a predictor of truancy (Asiyai, 2014; Gardella, Tanner-Smith, & Fisher, 2016).

SBMs are orchestrated by teachers, principals, and school psychologists to target children in need, including those with poor attendance records (McQuillin & Lyons, 2016). Programs and interventions that focus on targeted issues such as bullying or student self-esteem have been shown to improve student connectedness (Gregus et al., 2015). These programs are particularly
effective in elementary school students rather than middle school students (Springer & Diffily, 2012). As described in the literature, further research is needed to identify additional models aimed at improving student connectedness, particularly in elementary school students (Ekstrand, 2015; Ang et al., 2015). Districts and schools are encouraged to use multi-tiered student supports and intervention systems rather than one singular approach to the problem of student absenteeism. Moreover, strong leadership practices positively affect the institution of such programming (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2010). The approach of leadership either distributed or hierarchical and its influence on the success of such programming is underexplored in the existing literature.

The research dictates that there is a relationship between chronically absent students’ participation in a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance and subsequent attendance rates of these students (Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013. Although theoretical frameworks have been described for multi-tiered models in the literature, the impact of such models on student absentee rates has been underexplored (Balfanz, 2016; Benoliel, 2015).
Chapter Three: Research Design

Qualitative Research Approach

Paradigms offer both philosophical and conceptual frameworks for study of the social world. Many factors need to be considered when using a paradigm, including the influence of different disciplinary and intellectual traditions on the paradigm, assumptions about the paradigm, questions that arise from working with the paradigm, and the way in which knowledge is shaped based on the inquiry rooted in the paradigm. Three of the most prominent paradigms used in research are positivism, constructivism-interpretivism, and the critical-ideological paradigm (Alexander, 2006; Ponterotto, 2006)

The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm involves qualitative measures based on theory. This dynamic paradigm involves observation, interview, and analysis. Disciplines that ground their research in the constructivism-interpretivism include anthropology, history, hermeneutics, and sociology. Merriam (1991) affirms that the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm challenges many aspects of positivist-based research. Unlike the positivist paradigm in which reality is discovered and measured, the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm emphasizes that reality is constructed by the brain (Ponterotto, 2005). There is a stronger focus on process rather than on outcomes or products. In addition, application of this paradigm offers an understanding of one’s assumptions and how one creates meaning within the social world. Unlike the positivist paradigm, the researcher is more involved with the subject(s) of the research and completes the data collection and analysis independently (Merriam, 1991).

Overview and Philosophical Underpinnings

Phenomenology, the study of consciousness, can be applied to describe the meaning of lived experiences by multiple individuals exposed to a phenomenon or concept. The rise of
phenomenology in Germany began before the start of World War I (Dowling, 2005). Phenomenology is strongly based in philosophy, psychology, and education, especially in the works of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2007). The earlier phase of phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology, focused on the manifestation of phenomenon in consciousness, with a primary focus on describing people’s experiences. The later phase of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, focused on the fundamental idea that relatedness is a significant part of our being. Phenomenology is grounded in the belief that our only certainty lies in our consciousness which, thus, guarantees objectivity (Creswell, 2007). The basis of phenomenology lies in descriptions and experiences, as opposed to analyses or explanations (Moustakas, 1994). The act of perception is comprised of both intentions and sensations.

According to Moustakas (1994), three important underpinnings of phenomenology are intentionality (presence of consciousness), noema (that which is experienced), and noesis (the way in which it is experienced). The philosophical ideas of Husserl shaped the descriptive phenomenological approach to inquiry. This branch of phenomenology represents the idea that the researcher fully eliminates personal biases and expert knowledge from the research. Another pillar of descriptive phenomenology is the idea that commonalities in any given experience must be recognized in order to make possible a generalized description (Dowling, 2005).

Hermeneutic, or interpretative phenomenological research, focuses on understanding the meaning behind common life practices and understanding humans’ experiences as opposed to what they consciously know. Freedom is an important underpinning of interpretative phenomenological research in that the researcher interprets narratives in relation to multiple contexts. Researchers must seek to understand how participants make meaning of situations and
experiences by fully engaging with the data; this involves researchers considering their own conceptions of reality (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Finally, the interpretative phenomenological approach values the expert knowledge of the researcher (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

**Key Scholars**

**Husserl.** Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), associated with the birth of transcendental phenomenology, believed that phenomena should be studied as they appear, uninhibited by all assumption and beliefs (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011). Husserl originated phenomenological reduction in order to hold subjective perspectives and theoretical constructs in a state of dormancy (Dowling, 2007). “Lifeworld” is what individuals experience removed from cultural context and without interpretation. In this sense, Husserl posited that what is immediate to our consciousness is what is key to describing our experiences, as opposed to further reflection or thought (Dowling, 2007). As such, reality is thought to be objective in this approach.

**Heidegger.** Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), associated with the interpretive phenomenological approach, believed that the relationship between the individual and his lifeworld are of great importance. The term, being-in-the-world, was used by Heidegger to stress the importance of humans’ inability to “abstract themselves from the world” (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011, p. 729). Heidegger stresses the importance of a “person-in-context” and intersubjectivity. Although Heidegger concurred with aspects of Husserl’s understanding of human experience, he believed largely in the significance of understanding, as opposed to description (Dowling, 2005). Co-constitutionality, asserts Heidegger, specifies that, “the meanings that the researcher arrives at in interpretative research are a blend of the meanings articulated by both participant and researcher within the focus of the study” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730). Due to the nature of
the participants place within the world, Heidegger sought to interpret rather than describe. (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

**Scholarly Debate**

Finlay (2012) identified six contested questions regarding phenomenology which include the definition of phenomenology, the description of a phenomenon, interpretation of description, subjectivity, the nature of phenomenology as a science or art, and whether phenomenology is more modernist or postmodernist. One point of debate regarding phenomenology centers around the importance of researchers identifying which philosophical tradition they are following when conducting phenomenological research (Finlay, 2012). In addition, scholars debate the necessity of engaging in reduction and bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Because phenomenology stems from differing philosophical values, theoretical preferences and methodological procedures, Finlay (2012) posits that the different approaches should be dynamic and continue to evolve, as phenomenology is intended to be transformative in nature.

**Alignment**

The purpose of interpretative phenomenological (IPA) research is to understand how participants understand their personal and social world through their experiences and perceptions of the world around them. The researcher has an active role in this type of research as IPA places an emphasis on sense-making, both by the researcher and the participant(s). As such, IPA is considered a double hermeneutical process, given that the researcher interprets and makes sense of the participants’ experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Due to the nature of this research, IPA was a fitting approach. I intended to make sense of both administrators’ and teachers’ experiences with an attendance program aimed at student engagement. This type of in-depth, qualitative analysis allowed me to extensively explore the
perceptions and experiences of both administrators and teachers in implementing the program under study. According to Smith and Osborn (2008), “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” and the “complexity, process or novelty of sense-making” (p. 55). As opposed to making more general claims, the goal of this research was to understand the perceptions and understandings of a small, fairly homogenous sample of participants. As such, I used an idiographic mode of inquiry, which aligned with the goal of the IPA approach.

**Participants**

Six participants were involved in this study: three administrators (principal, assistant principal, and special education building administrator) and three teachers (first grade, third grade, and fourth grade). These participants were selected because of their roles in working with students who are chronically absent. Each participant was involved in the multi-modal program at the research site for at least two years and has been an educator for at least five years. Six participants were selected for this study in order to capture a variety of experiences. An interview protocol and coding system were created to assess the level of collaboration between teachers and administrators, and in each participant’s work with chronically absent students.

**Procedures**

Before conducting the study, I completed a trial interview with a second-grade general education teacher at the research site to gain a better sense of the interviewing process. I was able to refine my research questions and interview protocol based on this experience. This pilot interview helped garner insight about the time needed for each part of the interview, the questions that were best suited for the interview, and how to ensure that the participant would be comfortable during the process. Originally,
the interview protocol was more reflective of teachers’ and administrators’ understanding of chronic absenteeism. After I piloted the questions, I was able to adjust my line of questioning to be more relevant to the direction of the practice interview, specifically in addressing how teachers and administrators collaborate in order to deliver the multi-modal attendance program. In addition, I found that practicing the interview questions was helpful in that I was able to practice the coding process, specifically in-vivo and descriptive coding. As such, this interview practice was a valuable experience for me.

Initially, I sent a recruitment letter to identified subjects to gauge whether they would be interested in participating in the study (see Appendix A for letter of recruitment). After receiving consent from participants (see Appendix B for informed consent form), interviews took place with each participant in a private location (of the participant’s choice) for two, approximately 45-minute session. I used a semi-structured interview to collect data during this study, focusing on facilitating both an open and deep interview with six different participants (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The sampling was purposive, as to select participants who found relevance and significance in the research question (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Data was collected from individuals who had experienced the phenomenon. To allow a rich dialogue between participants and me, semi-structured interviews were employed. This type of interview allowed me to probe further when acquired information was deemed important or interesting. In this sense, I strived to appropriately represent one of the pillars of IPA: entering the psychological and social world of the participants. According to Sloan & Bowe (2014), “reflective interview transcripts require interpretive analysis by the researcher in order to produce a human science (phenomenological) description of the experience of the interviewee” (p. 13). Rapport, empathy,
flexibility, and understanding of participants’ experiences and perceptions are benefits of this data collection method (Creswell, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

After verbal confirmation that each participant desired to participate in the interview process, expectations about the interview process, time commitments, and confidentiality were communicated to all six participants. This communication was a key factor in ensuring that participants felt at ease about the interviewing process. Participants selected a comfortable and convenient location for interviews to be conducted. Times for the interviews were selected based on convenience and suitability for each participant. Permission to record interviews was sought by each participant; each participant agreed to be recorded. Communication was relaxed in nature with all participants, and adequate time for questions about the study was allotted both before and after the interview. Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the study during the interview if they felt uncomfortable or if they needed clarification on any aspects of the research. No interview felt rushed, and participants were given adequate time to answer each question/ follow-up on any questions they wanted to revisit. I followed the interview protocol closely, and also asked any follow-up questions to responses as needed/ wanted. Because my goal was to make sense of the experiences and perceptions of the study participants, I took adequate time in each interview to better understand how each participant made sense of chronic absenteeism and how chronic absenteeism was targeted through the multi-modal attendance program (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Upon completion of the interview sessions, participants received a gift card to Starbucks.

**Data Analysis**

I used structural analysis that I consider common and familiar, as allowed by van Manen’s phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Because understanding meaning is central to IPA, my goal was to make sense of the experiences and perceptions of the study participants. Because the meanings may not be explicit or transparent, the researcher must engage with the
data and periodically interpret the findings (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Multiple rounds of coding occurred during the data analysis stage.

I reviewed the interview recordings three times following transcription. Initial notes and thoughts were recorded on a paper copy of the transcription as I collected and formatted data, as suggested by Saldaña (2013). Based on reflection of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2014) review of the analytic process, I recorded notes regarding the participant’s inflection, tone of voice, body language, etc. during the interview. I then asked the interviewees to approve of the observations recorded and to assure that the notes were accurate reflections of their thoughts and experiences. Following this step of the pre-coding stage, I referred to a copy of the research question, theoretical framework, and goals of the study while making initial coding decisions (Saldaña, 2013). Given that Saldaña (2013) defines a code as, “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence,” I took the time to review commonly used words in the interview transcription (p. 4). Words were identified as frequent in the data, and thus these words were initially reviewed. Initially, I focused my attention on in-vivo coding and descriptive coding. This decision was made given that I am 1) a novice coder, and 2) I wanted to appropriately honor the participants’ voice (Saldaña, 2013). Codes emerged as patterns in the descriptive coding process of first-cycle coding.

During the second-cycle coding process, further thematic codes were identified within the first-cycle coding structure. I ensured that I reflected several times on the data, particularly during this stage, given my learning that coding is cyclical in nature (Saldaña, 2013, p. 9). At this point of the process, additional codes emerged that I found relevant and reflective of the initial coding during the first-cycle coding process. Following this coding process, I then
identified themes. Themes emerged from the participants’ understandings and truths as demonstrated via the data analysis process (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

**Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research involves gaining a better understanding of human behavior. Data are largely collected through observation and interview. Qualitative research studies may include case studies, phenomenology, purposive sampling, member checking, grounded theory, and narratives. Thematic trends in data help researchers analyze their research. Qualitative research is typically hypothesis-generating (Creswell, 2007). Findings identified through observation and discussion can stimulate a number of hypotheses for subsequent study using quantitative measures. As such, qualitative research can serve as a springboard for quantitative research by identifying study factors, study models, and goodness of fit between an influencing factor and an outcome (Creswell, 2007).

Many factors, including ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, auditing, transparency, and self-reflexivity must be considered when conducting qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The criteria for qualitative research will be discussed in relation to my research in the following section.

**Ethical Considerations**

In order to give proper consideration to ethical standards of the research, I did not expose protected information such as participants’ names or any student(s) or family identifiers (Creswell, 2007). It was important to establish positive relationships with participants and acknowledge power and ownership of any and all materials acquired through the process of researching. Reciprocity or giving back to participants for participating in the study (i.e., time and efforts) was important to consider. To avoid exploiting participants or the research site as a
whole, it was important to maintain sensitivity to power and marginalization (Creswell, 2007). Respect, confidentiality, and nondiscriminatory behavior were imperative to my research. I attempted to accurately reflect the perceptions and stories of participants by having participants review and correct my data. Rigorous data collection, data analysis, and reflection, through multiple levels of abstraction, were key components of the research process in order to maintain high ethical standards (Creswell, 2007). Finally, it was important to take into account the vulnerabilities of study participants and of myself as a researcher; this was achieved through open dialogue and honest conversation with the participants (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012).

**Credibility**

It was important to gain trust and credibility of the participants at the research site. Through structural corroboration, I related and reviewed my data several times in order to support or contradict my interpretations. This process allows researchers to feel confident in their conclusions (Creswell, 2007). Through member checking, participants review findings and interpretations in order to add to the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2007).

**Transferability**

The study findings can relate to a larger population. The findings can be extrapolated to other settings/communities where attendance is an issue with similar demographics to the research site. However, the data cannot be extrapolated to schools that are urban, that don’t employ multi-modal programs and/or distributed leadership practices, and do not have comparable reasons for student’s lack of attendance. According to Creswell (2007), readers are better able to make informed decisions about transferability when the description of the participants and research site are rich and thick (Creswell, 2007). Thus, I took copious notes on each research participant.
Internal Audit

Field notes and memos were recorded throughout the research process. These notes and memos were reflected on and considered in order to preserve integrity of the research. Through auditing during the research process, dependability and confirmability are founded (Creswell, 2007). Participants and I reflected on codes and categories that emerged from the data in order to achieve accountability.

Self-reflexivity and Transparency

Institutionalized oppression is defined as “the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person’s membership in the social identity group” (Cheney, LaFrance, & Quinteros, 2006, p. 1). Institutionalized oppression is highly relevant to my problem of practice in two primary ways. I strive to first create a classroom environment that feels safe and accepting of all students so that students want to come to school each day, and second, assure that I am aware of my own positionality and careful not to judge why a student may be absent. Because of the diverse population of students whom I work with, it is important for me to understand my students’ home lives and backgrounds. As aforementioned, many of my students are absent for a myriad of reasons; it is important to be mindful of the many reasons a child may not be able to attend school. Dika and Singh (2002) comment that there is a relationship between years of schooling and family structure, parent-school involvement, and family discussion. Further, the researchers assert that there is an inextricable link between social capital and psychosocial factors. Years ago, I had a conversation about awarding perfect attendance trophies/medals with a colleague. We discussed that some students do not choose to be absent, but instead are absent because their parents are unable to get them to school for one reason or another (e.g., drug related issue, lack
of transportation, perceived value of school). Reflecting on this conversation makes me think of the importance of viewing my problem of practice through a social justice lens.

My goal is to assure that all students feel comfortable and accepted in my classroom. By effectively engaging in dialogue with families and providing positive reinforcement to students, an environment of trust and understanding can be achieved. Children are more likely to want to come to school when they feel that they are appreciated and celebrated regardless of their background. My work as a doctoral student has highlighted the importance of having open and honest conversations with my students about our world and how we view others who may be different than us. My young students are incredibly impressionable, and I hope to teach them that “we are more alike than we are different.” Unfortunately, I know that this same message is not always reflected in the home environment for some of my students. Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016) write, “racism, criminal behavior, and brutality are learned- a reflection of the external environment to which one is exposed” (p. 39). I may not be able to control a student’s home life, but I can certainly create a school environment that promotes themes of social justice.

The school at which I am employed has been continuing an initiative to address the issue of absenteeism: an administrator will visit a classroom each morning and congratulate the class if there is perfect attendance. If a class has perfect attendance each day during the week, an administrator will provide a card and special song to the class. During morning announcements, the secretaries also thank students for attending school that day and announce classrooms that had perfect attendance that day. Attendance groups were previously established to encourage at-risk truant students to come to school each day. These groups created “public service announcements” about attendance and work on projects tailored to their specific interests. I have learned that building strong relationships with students is a primary factor in preventing
absenteeism. Thus far, I have found that this multi-modal approach to the problem of absenteeism is incredibly successful in my own classroom and throughout the school. Data released by our school principal demonstrates proves a significant reduction in absentee rates over the two years in our school. Last year, the administrative team continued to advance this multi-modal initiative, with a specific focus on family engagement. I would like to identify whether these initiatives will continue to reduce absenteeism rates.

As a scholar-practitioner, it is important for me to continue to reflect on my own perception and understanding of the attendance initiative implemented within my school, especially because I aimed to assess the quality of my school’s attendance program in this study. Privilege and power are certainly necessary to consider when reflecting on my own positionality and beliefs related to my problem of practice. My thoughts on student absenteeism are evolving, and they are rooted in my belief that attendance matters. I believe that a student who is ill and medically contagious should not attend school. However, I do not believe in the concept of “mental health days” for elementary-age students. I also do not believe that a student should be attending vacation during a non-school vacation week. Finally, I feel some level of disdain towards parents/ guardians who are not able to get their child to school because they are “still asleep” or “not up to it.” I have seen how upsetting missing a day of school can be for a child whose parent/ guardian is unable or unwilling to transport their child to school. I will need to be reflective of this belief as I conduct my study by better understanding how I developed this belief.

There is a large population of chronically absent students who are of a low socioeconomic status. Many chronically absent students also come from families in which one or both parents use(s) drugs. As an educator of an upper-middle class background with no
experience with growing up in a home of drug-use, I will need to be mindful and sensitive of the
day-to-day struggles that these students may face (e.g., homelessness, hunger) through
continuing to check in with students about their needs and connecting with families. It will also
be beneficial to increase my knowledge of the opioid crisis in my community.

To preserve my neutral position as a researcher and isolate my personal bias, I must
unpack my own opinions and conceptions and engage in reflective oversight (Machi & McEvoy,
2012). As Roulston and Shelton (2015) assert, I must be “well informed, however, to develop
high quality studies, studies that are ‘provocative, risky, stunning, astounding” (p. 9). As I
unpack my opinions, intuitions, and personal experiences related to the research topic, I must
carefully carry out my research to eliminate the aforementioned biases.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this research study is the extrapolation potential because every
school has different causes of low attendance and different program designs. This research could
be extrapolated to a similar community—one that is rural, uses a multi-modal program, and has
similar administrative structure- but not necessarily a community with differing culture or
programming. Because this research is qualitative in nature, I am not testing a specific
hypothesis, which poses another limitation of the study. Further, the inference in this study is
that a specific leadership style influenced the multi-modal process and the success/ perceptions
of participants. In this sense, I am assessing perceptions and not whether a specific leadership
model influenced absenteeism rates. However, the study helps to generate hypotheses regarding
whether a specific leadership model may influence the effectiveness of a multi-modal program
directed at the issue of chronic absenteeism.
Chapter Four: Summary of Findings

The goal of this interpretative phenomenological study was to better understand how teachers and administrators collaborate to provide a multi-modal attendance program aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism through student engagement practices. Distributed leadership practices relevant to the implementation of this programming were explored at a research site in a suburban area of southern Massachusetts. A qualitative approach was employed to acquire information about the site’s attendance program. Specifically, the interpretative phenomenological approach was used to better understand how the experiences of teachers and administrators impacted their implementation of programming. Semi-structured interviews allowed for conversations to occur about chronic absenteeism and programming. Further, I was able to gain a better understanding of how each participant worked to implement the multi-modal attendance program and what student engagement practices were used to execute the program.

Three teachers and three administrators were selected to participate in this study. Each participant was identified based on her experience in working with chronically absent students. In addition, each participant had at least three years of experience working in the school during the implementation of this programming. As such, this study provides insight into the experiences of teachers and administrators who have worked closely with chronically absent students and further reflects on their opinions relative to the success of the multi-modal attendance program.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study guided the data collection, specifically the first- and second-cycle coding of the data.
1. What are the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

2. What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

3. What commonalities can be found between the experiences and perceptions of administrators and the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

Data Collection and Results

Recruitment of Participants and Interview Protocol

The site for this research was identified because of its use of a multi-modal attendance program. A request for a letter of permission to conduct research within the school district was submitted. Upon approval by the assistant superintendent of the district, I identified six participants to recruit for the study. Each participant of interest met the requirements for participation in the study of at least two years of involvement in the attendance programming and at least five years of experience as an educator. A letter was hand-delivered to each participant to review. Each participant verbally expressed interest to me in participating in the study. After I provided additional information about the study and answered any questions about the study in person, consent forms were distributed, explained, and ultimately signed by participants.

Interviews were coordinated in person with each participant at mutually convenient times.

Description of Participants

Six participants ultimately were involved in the study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (Jane, Kristen, Bailey, Sarah, Karen, Rachel). The research site was also assigned
the pseudonym, West Elementary School. Demographic information about each participant is represented in Table 1.

**Kristen.** Kristen has been in education for 18 years, working at West Elementary School for eight years. Before becoming a kindergarten teacher in 2017, she worked in special education, teaching students with severe special needs. She has worked in an inclusion classroom, as a first, second and third grade general education teacher, and gifted and talented teacher. This is her second year as a kindergarten teacher at West Elementary School.

**Jane.** Jane has worked as a teacher for the past eight years at West Elementary School. She is currently a third-grade teacher, but also has taught first grade for two years. In the past, she worked as an integrated third grade teacher for one year, working as a general education teacher with cohorts of students with special needs.

**Bailey.** Bailey is a fourth-year educator at West Elementary School. She is a general education fourth-grade teacher, working to earn her Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in special education. Prior to her employment at West Elementary School, she was a teacher’s assistant for one year and a preschool teacher. She completed her Master’s in curriculum and instruction with a specialization in reading. She has a particular passion for working with students with disabilities and finding accommodations for students in the general education classroom.

**Sarah.** Sarah is the building principal at West Elementary School. She has been working with children for 36 years. She has been an administrator at the West Elementary School for the past nine years, serving as a vice principal and now principal. This is her fifth year as principal at West Elementary School. Prior to her work in the district, she worked in residential education and state agency work as a Children’s Case Manager and then Director of Children’s Services.
She has a passion for public education and the opportunities it affords to all children, regardless of their differing backgrounds.

**Rachel.** Rachel is the assistant principal at West Elementary School and this is her third year in this role. She has worked in the district for 31 years and this is her 38th year in education. She has served as a fifth-grade teacher, special needs preschool teacher, and she has worked in a special education resource room as well as in a self-contained non-categorical classroom.

**Kathy.** Kathy is the special education building administrator at West Elementary School. This is her third year serving in this role. She works closely with families and educators to assure needs are being met for students with special education plans. She has been in education for 15 years. Prior to working in her role as a special education building administrator, she served as a special education teacher at the K-6 level. She has a passion for working with students of varying needs and abilities.

It is important to note that five of the six participants have been involved with this programming for the past three years; one has been involved for two years. This programming began as a school-wide SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed Upon, Realistic, Time-Based) goal by the building principal after her review of attendance rates at the school. Teachers were encouraged, but not required, to participate in this building-based goal. The programming, however, was promoted regardless of participation in the written goal.
Table 1

Demographics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Years in Public Education (including this year)</th>
<th>Years of working with attendance program (including this academic year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Third Grade</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Special Education Building Administrator</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding

After each interview, I uploaded the audio recordings to temi.com for transcription. Coding was completed by hand, as I felt this was a way in which I could engage closely with the data. Any specific body language, tone, pace of speaking was noted. I also took rigorous notes about commonly used words in order to complete my first cycle coding centered on in-vivo coding. In-vivo coding allowed me to best represent participants’ own words. Further, I used descriptive coding to identify any short words or phrases used by the participants that I found particularly common or salient. While coding, I referred frequently back to the research questions in order to ensure that I was accurately addressing the goal of the study. Reflective techniques were used through several reviews of the data. These reflective techniques allowed
entry into the psychological and social worlds/perspectives of the participants. Each interview transcription was read at least three times and was viewed as separate and idiosyncratic in nature. During the review of each transcript, I was able to identify sub-codes for each data set. Following the review of each transcript and first-cycle coding, I adhered to the next steps of Saldaña’s (2013) coding process: second-cycle coding. During this process, I was able to identify emergent themes and then proceeded to identify connections across these emergent themes. Finally, I looked at connections between each emergent theme that I identified. Emergent themes and occurrences in the data set are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

_Emergent Themes and Occurrences in Data Set_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Number of codes found in data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Influence</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As patterns were identified in the descriptive coding process of first-cycle coding, three codes emerged: “leadership,” “connectedness,” and “family.” Green was used to identify any sentence or phrase that expressed the participant’s experience with leadership in the attendance program, blue was used to identify any sentence or phrase that was representative of the participant’s experience and understanding of teacher and school connectedness, and yellow was used to identify any sentence or phrase that was representative of the participant’s experience and understanding of the impact of family or home life on chronic absenteeism. Given that the purpose of this research was to understand teachers’ and administrators’ experiences with
collaboration in implementing this attendance program, the three aforementioned codes seemed fitting and relevant. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014)

During the second-cycle coding process, further thematic codes were identified within the first-cycle coding structure. Given the cyclical nature of coding, I reflected multiple times on the data, (Saldaña, 2013, p. 9). Following the coding process, six additional codes were identified that the researcher found relevant and reflective of the initial coding. Given the need to maintain focus on leadership, connectedness, and family, the researcher attempted to group subsequent thematic codes as related to leadership (68 occurrences), connectedness (91 occurrences) and family influence (78 occurrences). Secondary coding for leadership included, “support,” “communication & collaboration,” and “passion” (14, 38, 14 occurrences, respectively). Secondary coding for connectedness included, “praise,” “security,” and “compassion” (32, 21, 38 occurrences, respectively). Secondary coding for family influence included, “communication,” “control,” and “school importance” (19, 20, 23 occurrences, respectively). Each of these secondary codes was given a separate highlighted color and was reviewed and reflected on in relation to leadership, connectedness, and family influence multiple times.

Although other codes were identified during the first-cycle and second-cycle coding stage of the data analysis process, the final selected codes seemed most fitting and appropriate given the nature of the study. Thematic codes and sub codes, including the number of occurrences of each sub code, are represented in Table 3.
Table 3

*Thematic Codes and Sub Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Code</th>
<th>Sub Code</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication &amp;</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compass</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Influence</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School Importance</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Each emergent theme and associated sub-codes will be discussed in the following sections. These themes were carefully considered after reflection and extensive note-taking on each data set.

**Theme One: Leadership**

The leadership theme encompassed how leadership practices are distributed at West Elementary School by teachers and administrators. Each participant had experiences to share about the distributed leadership practices used at the research site and how these practices were important to the implementation of the multi-modal attendance program. The sub codes—support, communication, collaboration, and passion—were further identified in terms of how leadership was employed and experienced by both teachers and administrators. These themes
and sub-codes became transparent through the conversations of experiences and perceptions of each teacher.

*Support.* Support, the first sub-code for the leadership theme, involved how teachers and administrators sustained one another in addressing chronic absenteeism. Each study participant addressed how they felt that they supported one another and the chronically absent student. Bailey reflected on her work with an administrator early in the school year.

We knew… this was something we needed to work on, and I felt like the first day of school [Rachel] was really on it…. It was… really nice that [the student] had another adult besides me that really was pushing him being in school….It was a nice connection that I felt… [was] really… helpful.

Here Bailey described how the assistant principal connected specifically with her and the student regarding absenteeism. Absenteeism wasn’t something that teachers had to manage independently.

A key element of programming was the feasibility of interventions and supports put in place for chronically absent students. The administrative team (i.e., principal, assistant principal, special education building administrator) aligned the goals of the attendance programming with the teacher evaluation rubric; this was done in order to help teachers understand how the goals of the attendance program were linked and aligned to their work as educators. Jane reflected on the support she received from administrators in terms of her responsibilities toward the students and the attendance program as it related to the classroom dynamic.

They were understanding of everything on the plate of teachers and they developed interventions that were easy to put in place. It was a program that was going to be successful because they understood what we could do and what wasn’t as manageable.
In this instance, Jane revealed the extent of support from administrator that she perceived and how such support allowed for execution of the program at the classroom level.

*Resources.* Each participant agreed that the resources needed to carry out the programming were not costly or encumbering. Examples of resources included attendance stickers, postcards, posters, and personal support. Two of the three teachers expressed that they felt as though they were welcome to use their own student-specific interventions. As Jane describes,

Administration offered us a canned response for parents/guardians to e-mail out when a child was absent, so it was helpful because we were all sending out the same message as [other] teachers to get a better understanding of why the child was absent and that we were noticing that the child was absent. [Administrators] developed specific plans and dropped in for special visits. Plans… created on our own were definitely encouraged.

In summary, there was a balance of guidance from administrators so that teachers didn’t have to create all materials. At the same time, teacher autonomy was encouraged.

Kristen felt that the resources needed for the programming were dependent on the individual student. She asserts, “I guess just the IST [Instructional Support Team] process….there were things like the therapy dog and the mentor and the therapist.” Bailey expressed that she felt the necessary resources were provided to her. She explains, “…strategies were given to me so it wasn’t anything that I needed to look up on my own or find out on my own which…that would make it harder and that would make it harder to implement…my main resource was admin.”

Each administrator expressed that the teachers and staff of the building were important “resources” needed to support chronically absent students. In addition, each administrator
highlighted the importance of the pre-CRA or CRA (Child Requiring Assistance) meetings in terms of resource and support for families and students. These meetings involved a school administrator, families, and a representative from the district attorney’s office. Patterns of chronic absenteeism are addressed at these collaborative meetings. As Kathy explains, “The CRA and pre-CRA process is one thing that’s uniform in all the schools, but the attendance buddies [staff members who worked with a chronically absent student], the ‘hooray you’re here,’ the celebrations and those things were important. I don’t know if every school does that which makes it special.” All three administrators expressed that the pre-CRA and CRA meetings provide resources and support for families who may be struggling in getting their child/children to school on a consistent basis.

*Communication.* The second sub-code, communication and collaboration, encompassed how teachers and administrators worked together to talk about chronically absent students. Each administrator and teacher noted her frequent work as a team member to support students, and the value of communication in this type of collaboration. Jane explained her thoughts on the value of communication.

Checking in with parents as to why their child was absent and delivering that information was huge. There were daily e-mails, checking in with support staff, making sure the conversation was going through everyone involved at the school level so that everyone understood the absences. We all needed to be up to date and informed.

Jane further reflected on her work with an English Language Learner (ELL) Teacher when she explained, “Communication with him [the ELL teacher] was good… having other teachers and administrators being honest and open with the child and then delivering that
information to me was important.” Sarah explained how she views distributed leadership in terms of communication and collaboration.

I think teachers are excellent looking at data to kind of drive their instruction, so they can look at trends. We have our grade level leaders that I meet with maybe once every four to six weeks to kind of keep up on…any trends or things that they see. We have our front office team that meets every Friday to talk about…high needs kids, who’s presenting and why. And from there we’ll kind of branch out… who’s taken a piece of the pie to um, tackle maybe several important tasks that need to happen….The district has an instructional leadership team and that is principals, assistant principals, and department heads. We get together like six times a year. So, the superintendent had kind of distributed the message about attendance too. And when she came [to the district], she, she couldn’t believe that we were looking at attendance rates starting in kindergarten and over time she was blown away that our awareness of early attendance trends… again, that shared goal with everyone pitching in to, um, to help out is one model I was thinking of too.

Each of the administrators noted her collaboration with teachers and other administrators in order to best support chronically absent students. Rachel commented that she reaches out to teachers once a month to connect about chronically absent students. She also commented, “… If I’m walking around the building, last week I said ‘Sally, well what’s going on with your class this year with attendance?’…So, we have discussions about it all the time.”

Communication is ongoing between teachers and administrators. Kristen expressed this sentiment as related to her role in working with chronically absent students, “Communication with administration or the nurse or the guidance counselor is ongoing in terms of communicating
if the students is absent or is absent again.” Each participant asserted that there is time allotted to discuss chronic absenteeism, whether it be in staff meetings, common planning time among teachers, front-office meetings, e-mailing, or in-person communication.

The structure for communication between staff members about chronic absenteeism was outlined by Sarah who explained, “Base Tier 1 is the must dos which are safe arrival calls and Tier 1 teacher response to make that connection with families. And if a child was out for three days, on the third day, the nurse calls to just check in, especially if it’s medical.” Each administrator expressed the importance of Tier 1 interventions (i.e., teacher communication to families) when working with chronically absent students. Rachel highlighted the importance of communicating information between administrators and teachers, “I think the more that we give our gen ed teachers for your Tier 1 instruction, the better. Any information that we have about what’s going on, they need to be aware of it.” The rationale behind the importance of this Tier 1 intervention is described by Kathy.

…we certainly…encourage teachers to be the first line of defense and to reach out and often teachers have more information than even we do. We [teachers and administrators] try to share as much as possible knowing that there are time constraints within the school day and…you have good intentions, but then sometimes you just don't get to that person until, you know, a day or two later. So, um, we really just make a concerted effort to communicate and that can be during our staff meeting time and again in IEP meetings, or not necessarily IEP meetings…but other times that we're talking about kids.

**Passion.** The last sub-code for the leadership theme is passion about the issue of chronic absenteeism. Passion, in this context, is defined as a desire to reduce chronic absenteeism and find ways to encourage students to come to school each day. Teachers and administrators
unanimously agreed that public education is invaluable to students. Sarah explained that, “All teachers message families about the importance of attendance.” Bailey recalled, “If I had a question I could ask them [administrators] because this was kind of their baby, this was kind of something that they felt was important, which made me feel important...” When asked if there was any additional information she would like to provide about how leadership influenced the implementation of the program Kathy shared her thoughts.

I think that again our building principal was the kind of… the one who undertook it because she saw a need in and we came in green as green can be and so she said this dark hole, we're doing it... So it was wonderful having that leadership when we needed it the most and um, and she really just said you do this, you do this. And it was very distributed. She likes to delegate certain tasks to us, which is fantastic…. I think that she was the, she was the major influence in this implementation.

Each participant expressed their view that education is invaluable, and that part of students’ success academically and socially is reliant on coming to school. Jane said, “Academically, they suffer, they tend to miss concepts, losing confidence, withdraw from their teachers or peers and it impacts their overall happiness towards school. It also impacts how much they value school and their education.”

Sarah described her investment and understanding of public education in terms of equity and accessibility: “They have to get here, you know… I just want them here. Because public education is the democratic equalizing resource. It's about equity and access for kids when it comes to public education that they need to be here.” A common theme among both administrators and teachers was that they desired to see their students each day and that they are passionate about assuring they have exhausted all resources and interventions to get students to
school. Each participant rated themselves above a six (on a scale of one being the lowest, and ten being the highest) when asked about their ability to work with students who are chronically absent. As such, there was a noted level of considerable confidence in reaching students identified as chronically absent. All participants shared at least one anecdote in which they celebrated chronically absent students arriving to school, and excitement that they felt when seeing the student in school. Several participants also referenced the passion that they see in others when implementing and executing the attendance program. Jane shared the following story.

Administrators came in every morning to check to see if students were there. They would give them a hug and make them feel important early in the morning which was positive and important.

Bailey spoke to her experiences as a new teacher before the program was implemented and how her understanding and passion for the issue of chronic absenteeism expanded over the past three and a half years.

My first year… your first year of teaching is very overwhelming and this was before we had this program and… I think sometimes that being absent can kind of slip under the radar your first year of teaching. And I think that it wasn't my priority. I think that surviving was my priority and just being a first-year teacher and getting through the curriculum. And I remember having this moment at the end of the year when I realized that one of my students was absent… 16 times. And I just remember looking and just having like this deer in headlights moment when I had a letter that was going home to that student about how many times she was absent. And I really just was like, oh my goodness, I could have done more with this issue… I should've been more
aware of this…. I feel like the program that we now use after that first year is proactive. We're really trying get kids in school. We're trying to realize that it's important for them to be in school and tell them that we also care about them being in school.

Collegiality, mutual respect, and shared passion about the issue of chronic absenteeism and the implementation of programming to address this issue were common themes in the data.

Theme Two: Connectedness

The theme of connectedness involves teachers’ experiences and perceptions about how they were able to bond with their chronically absent students. This theme also addressed how teachers were able to create meaningful connections for their students whether it be with another staff member, mentor, or therapist. The goal to establish meaningful connections was set to assure that students felt safe, involved, and engaged in their school community. Participants discussed many different ways in which they were able to make lasting connections with students and families to support the chronically absent student. Several different interventions and strategies were offered by administration, and several teachers were able to bond with students in personalized and creative ways.

Praise. The first sub-code for the connectedness theme is praise. The participants had varied methods by which to praise their chronically absent students and/ or families of chronically absent students. When asked what interventions were regularly used by participants in interacting with students with chronic absenteeism, a variety of responses was shared. Rachel talked about her work in sending out postcards to students, praising them for coming to school. She further explained that simple, daily connections and positive reinforcement are important.

I think it’s the postcards. They love to get mail. I'm telling you some of the parents will say… ‘oh, I got your post cards.’ It's old school, you know what I mean? It's old
fashioned. Kids don't get mail. So that seems to be the best [intervention] because they come in [to school] after getting them in the mail.

Sarah further describes the work with postcards and other praise-based strategies when addressing interventions that are effective.

As I mentioned before...celebrations. An example of that is postcards sent to kids, 31 postcards for perfect attendance...we even gave them [chronically absent students] a sticker with a shark on it that said, ‘I took a bite out of attendance’ with some shark teeth to acknowledge....We’ve done the back to school, the video to welcome kids back... we had...visual motivators on classroom doors in the pods to celebrate and bus duty in the morning, very welcoming messages from staff with a tone of positive expectancy. One of my favorites is raise your hand if you’re here and then we did the attend-dance with 100 percent glasses on.

A common theme in the data was the value of the visual/ verbal motivators located throughout the school. Such motivators included banners about attendance, stickers, bar graphs of attendance, morning announcements about the value of attendance, charts about attendance, hugs from teachers, quotes or math problems posted on the shared bulletin boards, verbal reinforcers about attendance, attendance dancing and singing by administrators, and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS involved creating plans for procedures and routines around the school. For example, students were praised for following a hallway plan or bus plan. Sarah believes that PBIS encourages students to come to school by setting “tones of positive expectancy” in the school environment.

When asked about whether the adoption of PBIS influenced attendance rates, Sarah describes, “Well, it starts with being positive when you have a plan...‘show me the plan,’ sounds
way better than, you know, ‘Fifi get in line.’” Each participant unanimously agreed that positive reinforcement and praise were key to the success of programming. When asked about the strengths of the program, Kristen explains, “Um, I think the strengths are providing incentives and verbal praise for when they do come to school and making them feel valued and like they're...there's a purpose for them being here.” Common among the data was the idea that all teachers, administrators, and staff can make connections with students. Sarah mentioned that several different staff members including teacher assistants, custodians, cafeteria workers, etc. have made meaningful connections with chronically absent students that should be celebrated and valued. Bailey shared the following story about her view of the sentiments of the messages about attendance for kids.

We have this huge banner that says “hurray, you made it to school today.” We had this really wonderful chart that we still have and it's in an area of the school that... everybody passes by. It's towards... the entrance of their school and it just shows the percentage of kids here each month. And it, it was displayed nicely... everyone is able to read it and it was very celebratory. Um, which was really nice. You know, if kindergarten had... 96 percent students there that month and that was the biggest total for the month, there would be an arrow that would just say ‘hurray for them.’ ...a lot of positive language there throughout all of the interventions. I feel like it was all positive language. ‘Thank you for being in school today.’ ‘I'm so proud that you're here.’

Security. Security is the second sub-code associated with the connectedness theme. In this context, security is described as assuring the chronically absent student feels safe and engaged in the school community. Events such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) activities for early release days of school, PTO-sponsored dances and fairs, and Meet the
Teacher Night focused on assuring students feel secure and engaged in their school community. Attendance buddies, therapy dogs, mentors, and other groupings were formed to involve students who may have high needs or chronic absenteeism. A full list of interventions aimed at engaging chronically absent students can be found in Appendix E.

Kristen talked about her work engaging chronically absent students and assuring they felt secure in their school environment, “If there were something fun that was coming up like arts programming or something that she [student who is chronically absent] really enjoyed doing, like if it was gym day or we're going to have pajama day or something like that. I tried to remind her that that was the next day to get her excited.” She goes on to share,

She [student who is chronically absent] was involved with the therapy dog and that was always on a Monday morning so that we were trying to have the incentive for her to come to school to have the time with the dog…She also on other days had a mentor or had the in school therapy session on Thursdays and Fridays, so try to have something on multiple days of the week to make her want to come to school on those days. So, she had something to look forward to even if the rest of the school day was hard.

Kathy speaks to her feelings about both students and families feeling secure and engaged in the school community.

… I think that the attendance program, the aspect of that I think is a strength is mostly … just the reach outs. I think that…maintaining that family and community or that family home engagement, school-home connection, and knowing that we're truly invested in the child and we want what's best for them and always having that be the bottom line.

Overall the data supported that administrators and teachers use interventions aimed at supporting, securing, and creating positive relationships with families, as opposed to creating
distance between families and school. In this regard, security and a safe environment are paramount. Sarah shared her perspective on this type of feeling of security.

I think our food program, our weekend backpack [food program for families] has engaged families so that we can support them and then, you know, having nice conversations with them about the importance of attendance and our laundry room plan, um, is on hold right now. But we thought that would really help our economically disadvantaged families where they could come to school and do laundry, maybe volunteer, have lunch and maybe spend some time with a counselor or a reading specialist would. We would try to make connections.

Compassion. The final sub-code for the connectedness theme, compassion, involves teachers and administrators showing care and concern for chronically absent students and their families. Jane reflected on how she felt that it wasn’t just the classroom teacher making an effort with the chronically absent student, but also involved compassion and care from other teachers and administrators as well.

Often the administrators would come into my classroom and sing a special song about students being there and how happy they were that everyone was there which I think made the program seem light and fun. It was nice because it was at random and it was a nice reminder that they are seen by their administrators and that they value the kids being there.

The compassion toward the students exhibited by administrators and teachers was critical to implementation of the multi-modal attendance program. Each participant shared experiences of how compassion was an element in the student engagement practices used to support
chronically absent students. Bailey shared a story about how an administrator made one of her chronically absent students feel on a daily basis.

[Rachel would say] ‘I'm so happy you're here.’ She would check on him to see if he was in today….the moment she would see him would just light up and give him a hug. Sometimes they would have lunch together, especially if maybe he was having a little bit of a hard time that week. Um, so it was just really nice that he had another adult besides me that really was pushing him being in school…it was a nice connection that I felt was really, really helpful.

Common in the data was the expression that compassion, consistency, and investment in students are critical to the success of the attendance programming.

I think it's an all school initiative. I think everyone contributes in messaging, in outreach, um, in making a child's experience here at the school safe and happy and fun. So they want to be here. That's, that's the starting point….everyone pitching in.

As highlighted, all teachers and administrators who were interviewed had a great deal to share about their experiences with helping students feel secure, connected, and invested in their school community. Although interventions were personalized and perhaps targeted differently for each student, there was a common thread of care in all of the interventions generated. Both teachers and administrators tailored their interventions to the individual student, creating a lasting connection with the student.

**Theme Three: Family Influence**

The final theme identified in the data was the influence of family in terms of addressing chronic absenteeism. Each participant addressed the necessity of communication with families in combatting chronic absenteeism and creating positive and lasting relationships with these
families. As such, the first sub-code for the family influence theme was communication. Sarah shared her perception of communication when reflecting on the strengths of the program and working with families.

I think a strength is that when we begin to communicate with a family that we need to have our eyes and ears wide open. We need to be sensitive and nonjudgmental as we begin our conversations because we need the relationship. We have kids here for five years. So, if we're starting conversation in first grade, I know systemically I need to maintain… my goal, my wish is to maintain a relationship with a family. So, you come in and open and respectful and you never start with a heavy hand. I call it hitting a single. Just get on base, don't strike out.

There is a shared sense of responsibility by both administrators and teachers in communicating with families effectively, consistently, and frequently. Administrators provided “canned responses” for teachers (see Appendix F for canned response used at the research site) which were used to e-mail families expressing concern about a child’s attendance. A common finding was the difficulty in communicating with some families because a response from the family was not always returned. Kristen commented about her communication with families regarding the issue of absenteeism.

I think at the end of the day they [parents], it's their responsibility to get them to school and if in any way they felt like they were being blamed or made to feel like they weren't doing their job, they definitely got defensive and they would always report their child as sick and couldn't come to school even though we felt that was probably inaccurate.

There are many parties involved in communication with families, and each administrator agreed that this communication should begin with teachers in order for a strong teacher-parent/
guardian relationship to be fostered. Communication with families was also addressed in terms of district policies. Sarah described the three letters sent to families who have a chronically absent child,

… we decide who needs a letter and letters are issued, with the sentiment that you are welcome to come talk to us… there's three letters, they call them letter one, two and three. The letter one's kind of like, ‘look what we discovered.’ Kind of a warning. If there's anything we need to know, please call us. Letter two has a little more teeth to it and we would probably be calling them [families] in to really find out how can we help.

Rachel spoke about the line of communication with families, highlighting that the teacher’s communication with families should be first. She also shared that other staff, whether it be a nurse, adjustment counselor, etc. may have information about the student and/or family that is important to be communicated with the team. Such information should be shared before a letter is issued so that a constructive and meaningful relationship with the family can be preserved.

So I'm the first one reviewing [the attendance data] and then I check in with nurse, she takes it and looks at the medical piece and then adjustment counselor and I sit and meet and go through it and if adjustment counselor says ‘I don't want to [send out a letter]’…. Now adjustment counselor has a better communication with that family and the child has high anxiety. So, when do you choose to follow it up without a letter? A personal phone call and say, ‘hey look…you're slipping and sliding again.’ So it's really kind of part of the process. It's all built in to the system. And then the adjustment counselor, when we say CRA, the principal and I will sit down then and if there is a CRA that has to happen,
the principal makes the ultimate with ‘we’re going that way’ decision and then we send out that letter.

Communication. The importance of communication with families, whether via e-mail, postcard messages, phone-calls, meetings, or seeking out a parent during school arrival and/ or dismissal was recurrent in each interview with both administrators and teachers. Bailey reflected on her experience with parental communication in the following way.

I think it [e-mailing parents with a positive message about attendance] kind of opens up the doors for communication in a positive way. I think that sometimes, you know, I'm giving out a letter, it can make them feel defensive, but I think that when you email them and just ask, you know, if they'll be in school tomorrow, we really miss them. I think it makes it more positive for them and that defensive piece, that kind of wall that sometimes goes up with that I think comes down and I think it can really help with communication.

Rachel also expressed this sentiment in stating that it is important to maintain a connection with parents and not “break the bridge” between families and schools.

Control. The second sub-code, control, involved the idea that teachers and administrators only have so much power in getting a student to school. Each participant, in some way, expressed frustration in her lack of control over family behaviors regarding absenteeism. Kristen shared her frustration that it’s “really just tricky because there are little kids, they're not in control of their attendance. They can say that they want to come to school and you know, put that pressure on. But at the end of the day, they really have little control in getting themselves to school if the person responsible for them at home is not following through.” She and Sarah both alluded to the regulations and laws about kindergarten attendance. Sarah shared her thoughts on chronic absenteeism at the kindergarten level, especially about these laws.
So, although we know patterns in kindergarten are predictive of future patterns, we don't have a lot of teeth with our five-year olds. So, I'm certain that there were some kindergarten teachers who feel as though interventions weren't maximized. As I said, sometimes you hit a single. You might not impact someone this month, it might be in three months or it might be next September. But working with teachers, it's about contributing, and teachers might not feel the wind, if you will, or you know, we might not see the cumulative interventions. So, I imagine that can be frustrating too. By the time they leave second Grade, that second grade teacher hit a single and got on second base. By the time the child gets to third or fourth, we might've hit a homeroom. But their contribution is important.

Rachel shared her experiences with working closely with a chronically absent student who was truant because of home-related issues, “I'm not going to say I'm defeated yet, but I'd go to the house and pick them [students] up if I had to.” She expressed that, despite her work with this student and her efforts and ideas to provide transportation for this child, there is only so much in her control.

School Importance. The final code for the theme of family influence, school importance, is the idea that not every family imparts the same value on education. Rachel and Kathy both discussed the idea of having some type of parenting education classes about the issue of chronic absenteeism and the value of attendance. Both administrators expressed that they believed this type of parent education would be beneficial for families and nicely complement the multi-modal attendance program used at West Elementary School. Although the value of attendance is communicated to families in many different ways via teachers and administrators, it was
expressed through each interview there is only so much the school can do to help students with their attendance. Looking forward, Kathy explained.

There’s always gonna be pitfalls, but I think that parent education could go a long way. Even if it's things as easy as developing a visual schedule for their kids to make one thing less difficult in the morning. I just think that that would be really helpful. But we're not there yet. We've talked about those things. But, um, I think that that would be ideally our next phase.

Another reoccurrence in the data was the idea that students may have chronic absences due to vacations that families plan outside of the assigned school vacation weeks. Sarah reflected on the challenge of family vacations.

And if I had a magic wand, families taking vacation beyond the school calendar would go away. Vacation does impact our attendance rates. It puts us in an adversarial position too, because oftentimes parents, families will ask for work for kids to complete while they're on vacation. Yet in my mind, you're either on vacation or you're in school. It's not both.

As an administrator, Sarah encourages teachers to not provide missed materials when families vacation during weeks not designated as school vacation. Instead, teachers can encourage families to have their child read, keep a journal, and/or keep a budget during their vacation. This policy was adopted with the implementation of the multi-modal attendance program. Bailey described her perception of this policy.

During the whole entire school year, there were only two weeks…um, actually one week that all my kids were there. And there were several students, about two to three, maybe even four, that were on vacations multiple times and that situation can be really hard and they weren't kids that I worried about academically too much. But, that was something
that was really difficult to be asked to make them packets and to be asked to, you know, ask to give them something for a whole entire week. And I think something that was communicated to us was that we don't need to provide the materials. That those are materials that would be provided in school, that vacation is a choice and that we shouldn't feel the pressure. There’re so many things that we do during the school day and after school and before school that us making materials for kids who are not going to be there due to vacation, due to a choice, was something that was communicated to us. And I think that the pressure of that made me feel better just because I can kind of tell you what we're going to learn and I can give you the resources, but I, I shouldn't have to make separate curriculum for your child.

This final code regarding family influence was important because it displayed a shared understanding by teachers and administrators of the value of investing families in their child’s education. In addition, this theme exposed that there are many challenges to chronic absenteeism that are out of the control of school teachers, administrators, and staff. Despite the aforementioned challenges, teachers and administrators delivered an effective multi-modal attendance program aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism through student engagement practices. Rachel provided data about the change in attendance after the implementation of programming.

Okay, so to summarize our first year of our attendance goal, the goal being that we wanted to reduce the number of students with ten or more absences by ten percent. In 2015-16, 39 percent of our students had 10 or more absences. After our intervention in our school-wide goal, the number dropped in one year to 17 percent, so we surpassed our goal. The second part of our goal is that we wanted to look at students missing more than
ten percent of the school year (18 days) and we wanted to reduce this number by four percent. In 15/16, we started with 9.5 percent of our students missing more than ten percent of the school year and after one year working on this goal it was reduced to four percent. We exceeded our goal again.

These reported reductions in the rates of absenteeism at West Elementary School support the effectiveness of the multi-modal program conducted under a DL model.

Summary

This study focused on identifying the perceptions and experiences of both teachers and administrators as related to the execution of a multi-modal attendance program at West Elementary School. The data analysis section of this chapter weaves in both the experiences and perceptions of teachers and administrators, and also highlights the commonalities in their work with this program and the leadership practices used in the implementation of programming. The goal of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to allow the voices of participants to be heard. The analysis of the participants’ individual and shared experiences led to the identification of three prominent themes. The three themes of leadership, connectedness, and family influence were both prevalent and critical to understanding the voices of the study participants. A number of sub-themes emerged from these three common themes.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice

Both student absenteeism and truancy are prevalent problems in education at the K-12 level. One of the primary causes of chronic absenteeism is poor or limited behavioral or social engagement in school (Balfanz, 2016; De Witte & Csillag, 2014). Multi-modal approaches aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism involve multiple interventions that each address chronic absenteeism from a different perspective. Leadership practices which are strong and distributed in nature are important in implementing each intervention within the program (Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011). The goal of this study was to understand the experiences and perceptions of teachers and administrators in their collaboration to deliver a multi-modal attendance program aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism through student engagement practices. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

2. What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

3. What commonalities can be found between the experiences and perceptions of administrators and the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

Distributed leadership (DL) was used as the theoretical framework for this study, as the implementation of a multi-modal program requires administrative oversight and collaboration
and interaction between all stakeholders involved in the programming. Through the use of an interpretative phenomenological lens, I was able to better understand how the perceptions and experiences of administrators and teachers in delivering this program were influenced by the use of distributed leadership practice. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the findings of the study, the application of distributed leadership used in this study, the implications of the findings, and the possibilities of future research relevant to the research topic.

**Overview of Findings**

Several different findings were identified following the completion of the research study. The following section will identify the four most prevalent findings of the study.

- The relationship and level of connectedness between student and school community is imperative to consider when implementing a multi-modal program designed to address chronic absenteeism.
- The importance of communication and collaboration between all stakeholders in addressing the needs of students who are chronically absent.
- The use of multiple interventions, as opposed to one singular intervention, is necessary in addressing chronic absenteeism.
- The issue of control and the observed finding that teachers and administrators cannot control all aspects of a student’s attendance

**Discussion of the Research Findings**

The following section of this chapter will explore correlations between current literature and findings of this study. Further, this section will link the experiences of each participant to existing literature and each individual finding.
First Finding: Student Connectedness

Each participant strongly expressed the opinion that students’ feelings and perceptions about school are correlated with attendance. This is evidenced by the multitude of ways in which each participant attempts to engage, excite, and praise students identified as chronically absent. According to the literature, a students’ level of connectedness with their teacher and school community is foretelling of chronic truancy (Ang et. al, 2015; Ekstrand, 2015). Research shows that absenteeism is influenced by students’ perceptions of the school environment and these perceptions influence cognitive performance in school (Salzer et al., 2012).

Existing literature shows that school-based mentoring programs (SBMs) and related volunteer programs improve cognitive performance and social and behavioral engagement for students (Coller & Kuo, 2014; Gordon et al., 2013; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Simoes & Alarcao, 2014; Strapp et al., 2014; Volkmann & Bye, 2006). Further, this type of programming has reduced absence rates because of students’ improved feelings of connectedness to school community (Ang et al., 2015; Ekstrand, 2015). Participants alluded to the effectiveness of volunteer programming and SBMs during their interviews. Of note, study participants focused on the importance of students making meaningful connections with teachers, administrators, and staff within the building, as opposed to employing outside programming brought into the school. For example, some participants referred to the benefits of “attendance buddies” or “attendance groups” that engage chronically absent students with staff members. These types of groupings are suggestive of school-based mentoring programs represented in the literature, aimed at focusing on a particular aspect of student life (Gregus, Craig, Rodriguez, Pastrana, & Cavell, 2015).
In addition, a student and his/her family’s feelings of safety and security are important when considering attendance. Gardella and colleagues’ (2016) revealed that students’ perceptions of the safety of their environment affected attendance rates. The principal of West Elementary School, Sarah, discussed programming targeted at helping families, specifically economically disadvantaged families, feel a sense of security and engagement in the school community (e.g., weekend backpack food program, laundry service). As evidenced in the transcripts, teachers and administrators highlighted the importance of ensuring that families and students feel connected and safe within their school community.

**Second Finding: Communication and Collaboration between Stakeholders**

The need for effective communication between all stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, mentors) in the process of implementing programming is evident, as the participants all shared at least one story about a time when they communicated with one another about a chronically absent student. Gordon and colleagues (2013) asserted that achieving connectedness to school is best achieved when parents, volunteers, teachers and school administrators collaborate. Multiple study participants commented on the need for ongoing, consistent communication between all stakeholders in order to meet the goal of improved attendance rates. Varied forms of communication (i.e., one-on-one, e-mail, phone) were also valued by each participant. Participants unanimously agreed that communication with all stakeholders is important in ensuring that students arrive at school each day.

**Third Finding: Use of Multiple Interventions**

Each participant addressed the many different interventions used to engage chronically absent students. Further, each participant discussed the importance of attendance for all students. Participants shared their work in promoting the importance of students being in school each day.
Efforts to improve attendance included student engagement interventions such as praise, individualized recognition, mentoring, and collaboration with families. Evans and Cowell (2013) explored the value of programmatic change in a school, and its effects on absenteeism and both staff and student self-esteem. One of the common findings in their data was the idea that a multi-modal approach to programmatic change was transformative in reducing absentee rates and in making students feel valued and important in their school community. Wang and Holcombe’s (2010) study suggested that school engagement is important to consider when designing a school-based mentoring program. As evidenced in my transcripts, many different interventions as aforementioned were used to address chronic absenteeism that were centered specifically around student engagement practices.

Kearney and Graczyk (2013) explored how the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework could be used as a model to address chronic absenteeism. RtI is defined as a systematic and hierarchical decision-making process that targets interventions based on student need (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). RtI includes a number of tiers to describe levels of intervention; Tier 1 interventions are universal school-based programs, Tier 2 involve student-specific programming, and Tier 3 are more intense and individualized interventions. The importance of tiered interventions was a frequent finding in my data. One participant, Kristen, asserted that creating strong teacher-family relationships, specifically in the form of Tier 1 interventions, is a key factor to creating long-lasting change in attendance. In addition, several Tier 1 interventions were used to supplement the multi-modal attendance programming such as the mindfulness program, Calmer Choice. At the Tier 2 level, peer mentors were employed. At the Tier 3 level, many intense and individualized interventions were used in the multi-modal programming to address chronic absenteeism.
Finally, it is important to consider the value of school-wide interventions and supports (SWPBIS) in approaching the issue of student absenteeism. SWPBIS involves clearly defining school-wide expectations, providing targeted support to students (specifically through mentoring), and acknowledging and supporting positive behaviors (Freeman et al., 2015). One participant discussed the value of supplementing the multi-modal programming with the institution of SWPBIS practices. Freeman and colleagues’ (2015) identified a relationship between implementation of SWPBIS and attendance rates and early drop-out in middle and high school students. The multi-modal programming at West Elementary School includes reinforcement of positive behaviors for all students, the inclusion of mentors, and targeted interventions (Balfanz, 2016). As such, the use of the RtI model and SWPBIS provide both global and individual programming to reduce student absenteeism.

Fourth Finding: Parent Programming

Participants unanimously agreed that it can be challenging to communicate the value of schooling and attendance to some parents. The idea of creating parent programming to supplement the current attendance program was common in the data. This type of programming could create opportunities for parents to learn more about the issue of absenteeism and how absenteeism affects students in both the short-term and long-term. The program, Creating Opportunities and Casting Hope (COACH), was designed for vulnerable parents (Ayton & Joss, 2016). In this program, mentors met with vulnerable families and worked to empower these families to set life goals, improve communication skills, and address challenges related to employment and housing. Results indicated that participants’ self-esteem was improved through mentoring. This type of programming for vulnerable families has been proven effective for both the student and his/her family (Ayton & Joss, 2016).
Multiple barriers that relate to physical, psychosocial, and emotional factors prevent children from getting to school each day (Archambault, et al., 2013; Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013; Hancock, Lawrence, Shepherd, Mitrou, & Zubrick, 2017; Hansen, Pritchard, Melnic, & Zhang, 2016; Howland, Chen, Chen, & Min; 2017; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012; Li et al., 2012; Psaki, Mensch, & Soler-Hampejsek, 2017; Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014; Skedgell & Kearney, 2016; Sugrue, Zuel, & Laliberte, 2016; Tomori, Zalar, Plesnicar, Zihrl, & Stergar, 2001; Virtanen et al., 2009; Wang & Dishion, 2013). Comments provided by the participants of my study universally support a theme of control as it relates to the challenge of student absenteeism. Despite being able to control the school environment and its influence on absenteeism, study participants were significantly challenged by outside influences and their lack of control of family decisions in terms of student attendance. Teachers and administrators reflected on the many ways that they engage students to improve attendance, especially in personalized and creative ways. Elements out of the control of teachers and administrators include vacationing, health, perceived value of attendance by the family and issues related to family employment.

**Research Findings and Distributed Leadership**

At the core of this study is the proposal that distributed leadership is necessary to change absenteeism at West Elementary School. Heck and Hallinger (2010) assert that both organizational change and effective implementation of school programming are directly related to leadership. Distributed leadership views leadership through a lens of a social phenomenon, as opposed to one individual in power (Spillane, 2006). The data from my qualitative study supports that a distributed leadership model allowed for successful execution of the multi-modal program. Participants expressed that the multi-modal attendance programming was a group/
community effort, rather than being one conducted by a single individual. All of the participants felt empowered to tailor interventions to each chronically absent student and they also expressed support from the administration in doing so. Leaders were identified as being instrumental in setting the tone for the implementation and execution of this programming, as also noted by Gumuseli & Eryilmaz, 2011. Further, four of the participants directly expressed that the principal’s passion about the issue of absenteeism was a driving force in their investment in this pervasive issue.

Instrumental to distributed leadership practices is open-dialogue and shared sense-making (Raelin, 2015). Each participant expressed at least one occurrence in which open-dialogue and shared sense-making was important to their ability to make progress with a chronically absent student. For example, Jane discussed her communication with administration and another teacher in order to problem-solve and generate ideas for personalizing interventions for one of her chronically absent students. Overall, participants unanimously agreed that distributed leadership practices were instrumental in the implementation of the multi-modal programming.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Qualitative analysis, specifically IPA, was used in this study to make sense of the perceptions of both administrators and teachers in implementing the program under study at the research site. Given that the goal of this research was to better understand the perceptions and experiences of a small group of academic participants, more general claims about the findings of this research cannot be made. The nature of IPA allowed me to build rapport and trust with each of my participants through conversation. Important to my role as a researcher was to assure that I was being sensitive to the nature of the information shared with me during the interviews. I believe that I was able to achieve this by assuring participants that any identifying information
would be redacted or changed. Transparency was also important to my practice as a researcher. I outlined the steps of the interview process, discussed the purpose of the study, and answered any and all questions presented to me by the participants. I also asked participants to engage in the member-checking process by reviewing my notes and data to ensure that they felt as though my analysis was an accurate reflection of their experiences and perceptions. I believe the member-checking process was also a reflection of my commitment to the research study and my participants’ well-being. Finally, I believe that this study yielded both important and useful information relevant to the existing literature and expanding on current research.

Areas of Vulnerability and Limitations

Five limitations were identified in this study: extrapolation potential, qualitative design, positionality, positive bias, and confidentiality. As mentioned previously, the small sample size of this qualitative study and the unique school culture of West Elementary School influenced the ability to more broadly extrapolate the findings. Given that every school has different causes of low attendance and different program designs, it is possible that the level of transferability of this study is low. Extrapolating these data to other demographic areas (e.g., urban environment) or areas with a different school culture (e.g., different leadership practices) would not be advisable.

The study design being qualitative did not allow for the testing of a specific hypothesis. I was operating under the inference that a specific leadership style influenced the multi-modal process and the success/ perceptions of participants. This qualitative study could be perceived as hypothesis-generating. For example, subsequent work could focus on a comparison of leadership models in terms of how they influence the successful execution of a multi-modal attendance program. The current work, being qualitative, was limited in that it could not test a hypothesis.
Another limitation of this study was my positionality and how this may have affected the data analysis process. Over the past four years, I have gained experience working with chronically absent students. It is possible that some of my own biases toward attendance-related issues were present when completing the study. However, I attempted to limit the influence of my bias in several different ways. First, I decided to have each participant review my interpretation of the data and my notes on her transcripts. This decision was made to better ensure that participants’ comments and reflections were accurately represented and interpreted. Second, I also made use of a critical friend who reviewed my interpretations and data analysis practices. This critical friend is comparably educated, has experience in coding, has been a teacher for ten years, and is external to the research site. Her review of the data and interpretations allowed for an outside opinion on my work by an equally experienced colleague. Her comments were considered when analyzing the final data.

There was potential for positive bias in this study given that the teachers who participated may have felt concern that the administrators would read their comments presented in the dissertation. Although there was potential for positive bias, participants provided constructive criticism and not all comments were positive about their work with the attendance programming at the research site.

Lastly, a limitation that emerged throughout the process related to the confidentiality of students. Some participants were hesitant to share stories about chronically absent students because they were concerned that this information was too confidential in nature. I addressed early in the process of the study that all identifiable information would be deidentified or redacted, but it is possible that some participants still felt cautious when considering sharing personal information about students.
Implications for Future Study

There are several implications for future study yielded from this research. One potential area of future study is the assessment of different leadership practices as related to the implementation of attendance programming. This study specifically explored the application of distributed leadership practices in the implementation and execution of programming. An exploration of differing leadership practices may further the scholarship on this topic. For example, this study identified that the specific leadership model at West Elementary School influenced the teachers’ ability to individualize interventions. Teachers also felt that there was a mutuality in the approach to the problem of attendance as described by mutual respect and trust exhibited by teachers and administrators. A different leadership model may have garnered different results. Another area of future study is assessing the direct correlation between specific interventions and attendance rates. Different interventions were explored in this research; however, it may be valuable to identify the impact of specific interventions on attendance rates. The perspective of students regarding the impact of specific interventions may be interesting to investigate. Finally, a study that investigates the work of specific cohorts of school staff may prove beneficial to research on this topic. Given that this research study focused specifically on teachers and administrators, it may be important to view the issue of chronic absenteeism through the lens of another stakeholder. For example, the work of adjustment counselors in addressing chronic absenteeism may add another perspective to this issue.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The results of this study provide context and examples of how a distributed leadership model influenced the execution and effectiveness of a multi-modal program aimed at addressing chronic absenteeism. This study validates the importance of leadership’s role in addressing
chronic absenteeism, and how several interventions can be used to increase school attendance rates. The following section of this chapter will outline the four recommendations suggested from this study, and how these recommendations can affect attendance practices in similar public elementary schools.

The first recommendation relates to the need for schools to design programming that is fitting and reflective of the school’s needs and culture. When considering the needs and culture of the research site, the principal was able to set the tone for the programming, using her knowledge of the families, students, and school community to create a plan for implementation. Of primary interest to the principal was setting a tone of positivity and security for students and families. Further, the principal took an interest in involving all school personnel in this goal to increase attendance rates at the research site. This was achieved through the use of several different interventions (see Appendix E for a list of interventions used at the research site) and a collaborative effort among staff and administration. Each participant agreed that the cost of this program was low, and that the interventions used were manageable for teachers and administrators.

The second recommendation is to establish opportunities for all stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, mentors) to learn more about the causes and effects of chronic absenteeism. An initial step to addressing any problem is to understand the root or the underlying influences of the problem. Although participants did not receive any targeted professional development workshops on chronic absenteeism as a part of this program, they all expressed confidence in their ability to work with chronically absent students. Four participants expressed an interest in creating opportunities for school teachers, and administrators, and families to learn more about the issue of chronic absenteeism.
The third recommendation would be to use distributed leadership practices in addressing chronic absenteeism. All participants identified the importance of communication and collaboration between teachers and administrators. A distributed leadership approach would involve both teachers and administrators working collectively to discuss absenteeism, identify areas of concern, and communicate to best serve targeted students. In addition to collaboration and communication between teachers and administrators, participants highlighted the value of frequent and consistent communication with families about chronic absenteeism.

The final recommendation is for teachers and administrators to assess the ways in which they work to engage students and families in the school community. A student’s level of connectedness is paramount to school attendance (Ang et al., 2015; Ekstrand, 2015; Gordon et al., 2013). As such, it is beneficial for schools to examine and assess the ways in which they engage both students and families in the school community. To begin, schools are encouraged to identify the multiple interventions described in the literature to target and engage students and families. This initial step can be eye-opening for educators and administrators, as it was for me in conducting my literature review. After reviewing the listed targeted interventions, teachers and administrators can collaborate to identify the most effective interventions and then add any additional interventions that may seem fitting for their school culture. A second step is to periodically assess the effectiveness of these interventions, thereby ensuring continuous quality improvement as related to the challenge of student and family engagement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design programming that is fitting and reflective of the school’s needs and culture</td>
<td>Establishing connectedness to school community involves the collaboration of teachers, parents, volunteers, and school administrators. Gordon et al., 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish opportunities for all stakeholders to learn more about the causes and effects of chronic absenteeism.</td>
<td>Principals have an important role in setting the tone for school culture. Gumuseli &amp; Eryilmaz, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute distributed leadership practices in addressing chronic absenteeism</td>
<td>Opportunities of vulnerable parents can be effective in raising awareness and strengthening self-esteem. Ayton &amp; Joss, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is a positive correlation between strong leadership practices and institution of multi-modal programming. Gumuseli &amp; Eryilmaz, 2011, Heck &amp; Hallinger, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identify and assess ways in which teachers and administrators engage students and families

As evidenced in the literature, the cognitive, social and behavioral engagement of the student is accomplished through establishing connectedness. The usage of many different approaches/interventions, as opposed to one singular approach/intervention, can help in addressing the same problem.

Ang et al., 2015
Evans & Cowell, 2013
Gordon et al., 2013
Sugrue et al., 2016
Balfanz, 2016
Benoliel, 2015

Conclusion

This study was aimed at better understanding the perceptions and experiences of both teachers and administrators as they attempted to deliver a multi-modal attendance program aimed at combatting chronic absenteeism through student engagement practices. Distributed leadership was used as a framework to better understand how a specific leadership model affected the execution of attendance programming. This qualitative research identified four factors to consider when implementing a multi-modal attendance program: communication and collaboration between stakeholders, the relationship and level of connectedness between student and school community, use of multiple interventions as opposed to one singular intervention, and the issue of outside factors that teachers and administrators cannot control. Study limitations include small sample size, qualitative nature of study and the lack of extrapolation potential to schools having different cultures and leadership styles. Four recommendations for multi-modal attendance programming were identified: designing programming that is specific to the individual school’s needs and culture, teaching all stakeholders about the underlying influences
on chronic absenteeism, involving all stakeholders in the execution of programming (i.e., distributed leadership model), and periodically reassessing programming for continuous quality improvement. Future scholarship may involve the study of the effects of different leadership styles on attendance programming, identifying the perceptions of other stakeholders on program execution, and the effects of individual interventions on attendance rates.
References


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2005.11.026


Wang, M. T., & Dishion, T. J. (2012). The trajectories of adolescents' perceptions of school climate, deviant peer affiliation, and behavioral problems during the middle school years. *Journal of Adolescent Reserach, 22*(1), 40-53.


Appendix A

Letter of Recruitment

Date
Participant Name
Participant Address

Implementation of a Multi-Modal Attendance Program: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teacher and Administrator Perceptions of Distributed Leadership Practices

Mary Katherine Stevens

Dear ________________,

I am writing to inform you of an opportunity to participate in a study aimed at understanding how teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement. I am conducting this study as an education doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. Based on your experience with this topic and position within the school, you have been selected for participation in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be asked to engage in two, approximately 45-minute semi-structured interview sessions. You will be asked questions about implementation of the attendance program, leadership practices, and collaboration between teachers and administrators. Participation in this study is entirely confidential and voluntary. Recordings and transcription of data will be safeguarded in a secure location.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Mary Katherine Stevens by phone at [Redacted] or by email at [Redacted]. Thank you for your consideration of this prospect.

Sincerely,

Mary Katherine Stevens
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Quannah-Parker McGowan, Student Researcher, Mary Katherine Stevens

Title of Project: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of a Multi-Modal Attendance Program: Perceptions of Distributed Leadership Practices by Teachers and Administrators

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I will explain it to you first. You may ask me any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

Based on your experience with the implementation of a multi-modal attendance program aimed at improving student attendance through student engagement and your position within the school, you and five other participants have been selected for participation in this study.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand how school administrators and teachers provide a multi-modal program designed to address student absenteeism. This program involves many different interventions aimed at targeting chronic absenteeism.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in two, one-on-one semi-structured interview sessions. You will be asked questions regarding chronic absenteeism, implementation of the attendance program, leadership practices, and collaboration between teachers and administrators.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed for two, approximately 45-minute sessions at a time and place that is convenient for you. Approximately one month later, you will be asked to review the coded data, and assure that I have accurately reflected your responses regarding your experiences and perceptions.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

Although all identifiable information will be redacted/changed, there is a likelihood that your
information may still be recognized. The likelihood of this risk is minimal.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other districts or individual schools in implementing a multimodal program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only I will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Data will be stored electronically on a password-protected laptop. Data will be destroyed three-years after the study ends.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Mary Katherine Stevens the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Quannah Parker-McGowan, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will be given a $10 gift certificate to Starbucks as soon as you complete the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate? No, participation will not cost you anything.
Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.
I agree to take part in this research.

_________________________ ________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

_________________________
Printed name of person above

_________________________ ________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

_________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Teachers

Date:

Institution:

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Mary Kate Stevens, graduate student at Northeastern University

Research Question: How do teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a teacher who has a great deal to share about the current program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement that is used here at the research site. My research project focuses on how this program has been implemented to combat chronic absenteeism. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into how teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing this program. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can work together to best combat the issue of chronic absenteeism.

Your responses are important. To make sure that I capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes that will eventually be destroyed after they are transcribed. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about two, 45-minute sessions. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Demographic Questions:

Q1: How long have you been teaching at the school?

Q2: What grade level do you teach?
Q3: How long have you been involved to some extent in the current attendance program used at the school?

On a scale of 1-10, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, please rate the following:

Q4: Your knowledge of working with students identified as chronically absent.

Q5: Your success of implementing the current attendance program with your students identified as chronically absent.

As I mentioned, my research focuses on the implementation of the multi-modal program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement that is used here at MH. I am now going to ask you questions about your role working with students identified as chronically absent, how leadership relates to the implementation of the school’s attendance program, and opportunities offered for professional development regarding absenteeism. I would like to hear about your experiences in your own words. If you mention other people, please do not mention names, but use a pseudonym or their job title.

**Implementation and Knowledge Questions**

Q6: What do you consider as causes of chronic absenteeism?

Q7: What do you consider as effects of chronic absenteeism on the absentee?

Q8: What is your role in working with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q9: How would you describe your ability to work with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q10: What student engagement practices do you use when working with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q11: The attendance program at your school is described as multi-modal because it addresses chronic absenteeism through a number of interventions. What interventions do you regularly use to address the issue of chronic absenteeism?

Q12: Tell me a story about your work with a student who was identified as chronically absent during your work with the attendance program.
Q13: What do you consider strengths of the current attendance program? Are there any particular aspects of the program that you consider stronger than others in reaching students who are chronically absent?

Q14: What do you consider weaknesses of the current attendance program?

**Leadership questions**

Q15: Describe your interaction with school administration regarding the implementation of the current attendance program.

Q16: To what extent did you collaborate with administrators to deliver the attendance program? Other teachers?

Q17: How would you describe administration's role in terms of implementing and providing the current attendance program within the school?

Q18: Tell me a story about a time when you collaborated or failed to collaborate with administration regarding a student with chronic absenteeism.

Q19: Think back to the start of implementation of the multi-modal programming. How have leadership practices changed in terms of implementing this program over the past three years?

**Professional Development questions**

Q20: What resources did you need in order to implement the attendance program? Were these resources met?

Q21: Were there professional development opportunities or trainings that were offered regarding the issue of absenteeism or the implementation of programming?

Q22: What types of additional opportunities do you feel would have been needed in order to provide the current attendance program?

**Wrap-up questions**

Q23: Is there additional information that you would like to provide regarding how leadership influenced the implementation of the program?
Q24: What do you think would enhance the current program in terms of engaging students to combat chronic absenteeism?

Q25: Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Do you have any other questions for me? Thank you for your time and participation.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Administrators

Date:

Institution:

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Mary Kate Stevens, graduate student at Northeastern University

Research Question: How do teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing a multi-modal school-based program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement?

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as an administrator who has a great deal to share about the current program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement that is used here at the research site. My research project focuses on how this program has been implemented to combat chronic absenteeism. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into how teachers and administrators collaborate during the process of implementing this program. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can work together to best combat the issue of chronic absenteeism.

Your responses are important. To make sure that I capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes that will eventually be destroyed after they are transcribed. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about two, 45-minute sessions. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Demographic Questions:

Q1: How long have you been an administrator at the school?

Q2: What type of administrator are you in the school?
Q3: How long have you been involved to some extent in the current attendance program used at the school?

On a scale of 1-10, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, please rate the following:
Q4: Your knowledge of working with students identified as chronically absent.
Q5: Your success of implementing the current attendance program with your students identified as chronically absent.

As I mentioned, my research focuses on the implementation of the multi-modal program aimed at improving attendance through student engagement that is used here at the research site. I am now going to ask you questions about your role working with students identified as chronically absent, how leadership relates to the implementation of the school’s attendance program, and opportunities offered for professional development regarding absenteeism. I would like to hear about your experiences in your own words. If you mention other people, please do not mention names, but use a pseudonym or their job title.

**Implementation and Knowledge Questions**

Q6: What do you consider as causes of chronic absenteeism?

Q7: What do you consider as effects of chronic absenteeism on the absentee?

Q8: What is your role in working with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q9: How would you describe your ability to work with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q10: What student engagement practices do you use when working with students who are identified as chronically absent?

Q11: The attendance program at your school is described as multi-modal because it addresses chronic absenteeism through a number of interventions. What interventions do you regularly use to address the issue of chronic absenteeism?

Q12: Tell me a story about your work with a student who was identified as chronically absent during your work with the attendance program.
Q13: What do you consider strengths of the current attendance program? Are there any particular aspects of the program that you consider stronger than others in reaching students who are chronically absent?

Q14: What do you consider weaknesses of the current attendance program?

Leadership questions

Q15: Describe your interaction with teachers regarding the implementation of the current attendance program.

Q16: To what extent did you collaborate with teachers to deliver the attendance program? Other teachers?

Q17: How have leadership practices changed in terms of implementing this program over the past three years?

Q18: Tell me a story about a time when you collaborated or failed to collaborate with another administrator or teacher regarding a student with chronic absenteeism.

Professional Development questions

Q19: What resources did you need in order to implement the attendance program? Were these resources met?

Q20: Were there professional development opportunities or trainings that were offered regarding the issue of absenteeism or the implementation of programming?

Q21: What types of additional opportunities do you feel would have been needed in order to provide the current attendance program?

Wrap-up questions

Q22: Is there additional information that you would like to provide regarding how leadership influenced the implementation of the program?

Q23: What do you think would enhance the current program in terms of engaging students to combat chronic absenteeism?

Q24: Is there anything else that you would like to share?
Do you have any other questions for me? Thank you for your time and participation.
### Appendix E

**List of Interventions Used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal #2: Attendance Intervention Activities:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bus Duty/Announcements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secure 2016 E0Y Data</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintain timely Safe Arrival Calls</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post Visual Motivator(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent/Guardian Email</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Letters/Meetings/Calls</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Classlists with student history monitoring</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meet Your Teacher Night</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children Requiring Assistance/Keep Em Coming</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Feature in newsletters</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monthly Reviews</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Tier 1 Teacher Response</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Medical Concerns</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Additional targeted support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarships for programming</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attendanceworks.org</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEM-based Early Release Day learning activities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Celebrations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Video to welcome students</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Groups with Adj. Counselor Attendance Buddies**

- **Selected students**
  - 4 students (tech activities)

*Thousand of small, purposeful interactions*
Appendix F

Canned Response

Hello ________
I am contacting you to let you know we miss __ in our classroom!!
[Redacted] is focusing efforts to improve student attendance rates.
Thank you for your calls to the office and/or the nurse regarding missed days of school. I wanted to be sure to reach out to ensure ____ will be back in school as soon as possible.

Sincerely,