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Combating School Truancy: Current Practices and Recommendations for Improvement

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COMBATING SCHOOL TRUANCY: CURRENT PRACTICES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Paige McNulty

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

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in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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This work is dedicated to my sons, Logan and Lucas. They are an inspiration to me for learning, strength, courage and perseverance. I would also like to dedicate this work to my husband Joe, who has supported and encouraged me throughout my academic journey. Lastly, I want to thank my Dad, Fred, for all of his love, friendship and mentoring that has helped pushed me to achieve my goals.

ABSTRACT

School truancy poses a significant problem for the U.S. educational system and our society. Truant students suffer negative effects not only in their education, but also in their potential future financial earnings and even their life expectancy. Despite the recognition of this problem in the United States, efforts to curb truancy have proven largely ineffective.

An exploratory case study, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with five participants—four school principals and one district superintendent—examined the perceptions of current truancy intervention programs and ways to improve them. The most common practice for combating truancy involved the employment of truancy officers. However, participants indicated that the most effective ways to curb truancy were by taking more proactive approaches within students' homes and by forming partnerships with different agencies, such as the police and court system.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I started my professional career teaching high school students with behavioral disorders. Over the course of my teaching career, I constantly faced challenge students who were chronic truants. By the time they arrived in my high school classroom, their truancy problems had been around for a while. Typically, the school district would deal with these problem students by suspending them or referring them to the courts. Most of them ended up becoming dropouts disappearing from my professional life. In my naivety as a young teacher in my early 20s, it was out of sight, out of mind. I did not fully comprehend the gravity of the situation, nor did I process the fact that we, as a school district, weren't working very hard to keep these kids in school.

As I transitioned into my administrative career, I continued to struggle with how to work with chronically truant teens. I was more aware of the problem at this point, albeit from a different perspective; these students were dropping out and we were losing funding. In addition to the financial implications, there were legal ones: we had to work closely with courts and probation officers because many of these students also had criminal backgrounds.

As an assistant superintendent, I was curious if there were any schools or districts that had found innovative ways to work with these students. These kids are obviously crying out for help, and I hoped that my journey of researching and writing this paper might bring some new programs to light.

The current study explores the perceptions of school principals and district superintendents regarding truancy interventions implemented in urban Chicago school districts. According to Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, and Abdon (2013),

truancy has been a prevalent concern within the U.S. educational system for more than a century. The researchers noted that compared to other nations, the United States has a high rate of truancy among its students. Furthermore, the country's policies and programs to combat truancy are more tolerant and less strict; these measures have proven unsuccessful in the past two decades. Despite the significant amount of federal and state resources expended to minimize truancy in schools, it remains a significant problem in the U.S. public education system (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Flannery, Frank, and Kato (2012) presented information regarding truancy rates in the U.S. high school system. The researchers noted that while different states and jurisdictions define truancy in their own ways, national surveys revealed that all high schools in the United States face significant truancy rates. According to the researchers, 4.3% of all ninth-grade students reported engaging in truant behavior (i.e., voluntarily skipping classes at least once in the month preceding the survey). This rate increases as students become older: Among 10th-grade students, the truancy is rate 7.5%. That number increases to 8.7% among 11th-grade students. Finally, 12th-grade students reach a rate of 13.0%, more than twice that of freshmen.

McKinney (2013) asserted that truancy is not only an educational concern, but also a legal one, as truancy is considered a juvenile offense in 43 states. In these states, truancy constitutes a significant portion of total offenses committed by minors. Specifically, McKinney noted that by 2010, truancy made up 36% of the 137,000 reported juvenile offenses in the United States.

Background

Researchers have shown that truancy is not just an educational concern affecting U.S. schools, but a legal one as well, as it represents a significant portion of all cases filed against youth offenders (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2012). Furthermore, it is a rampant form of misconduct among students, increasing in frequency as students get older, with 13% of high school seniors self-reporting their truancy (Flannery et al., 2012). Truancy has been considered a major concern by schools and by national and state government because of its negative effects on both students and the nation as a whole.

Schoenberger (2012) outlined the educational researchers' significant findings regarding truant behaviors. Schoenberger noted that truancy is significantly related to other future behaviors, many of which often have negative implications for students. First, Schoenberger noted that students who engage in truant behaviors at a younger age tend to become less engaged with schoolwork and education in general, results often linked to higher dropout rates. Specifically, Schoenberger noted that students who miss class in their earlier years tend to discontinue their education altogether, failing to finish high school or college. Schoenberger noted that while dropping out is not necessarily a problem in and of itself, dropouts do tend to experience certain problems. For instance, Schoenberger noted that dropouts earn lower average incomes compared to individuals who complete their high school education. Dropouts also demonstrate higher rates of unemployment, incidence of health concerns, and incarceration. Schoenberger also noted that dropouts have shorter life spans, indicating that truant behavior has implications not just for the academic goals of students and their families, but even for their physical well-being.

McKinney (2013) echoed Schoenberger's (2012) findings, stating that in addition to having detrimental effects on academic performance, habitual truancy predicts future negative behaviors. However, the researcher also added that students who exhibit truant behaviors are more likely to have problems with alcohol and drug use during their high school years. Furthermore, the researcher noted that truancy often leads to more serious misdemeanors, such as fighting, theft, and other offenses.

Flannery, Frank, and Kato (2012) noted that relatively high rates of truancy in the United States persist despite the negative effects established in literature. Moreover, the Flannery noted that, while the federal government has spent millions of dollars to fund programs that aim to minimize truancy, those efforts have not been successful. A study by Spencer (2011) found that programs and offices purporting to solve the problem of truancy have insignificant issues with truancy and dropout rates in their areas. Employing a truancy officer within schools and school districts, for example, does not have a significant effect on truancy and dropout rates among students.

Statement of the Problem

Truancy, according to Flannery, Frank, and Kato (2012), refers to the unexcused absences of students from school and represents a significant problem for the U.S. educational system. Moreover, according to McKinney (2013), truancy makes up a significant portion of the juvenile offenses recorded annually in the United States. It has been related to various negative outcomes for students, including poor academic performance, dropout, unemployment, decreased financial capacity, alcohol and drug abuse, increased health concerns, and shorter life spans (McKinney, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012). Together, these established effects of truancy have contributed to increased

attention from the government and to the creation of programs and interventions to minimize the phenomenon (Flannery et al., 2012; Spencer, 2011). However, despite their efforts, these programs and the individuals tasked with implementing them have failed to successfully curtail truancy rates in the United States (Flannery et al., 2012; Spencer, 2011).

According to McKinney (2013), most academic literature on the subject has focused on understanding the factors affecting truancy rates across different demographics and segments of the student population. When studies have focused on the effectiveness of truancy interventions, research has been too general, asking merely whether an intervention has minimized truancy rates, instead of asking why it did or did not. The current study will attempt to address this need for more specific questioning by asking different stakeholders in student attendance—school principals and school district superintendent—about their perceptions and experiences with implementing truancy interventions. These individuals will be asked to describe their perceptions of both truancy interventions and their specific components. Without a study incorporating such a line of questioning, existing truancy interventions may remain insufficient to successfully curb truancy in high schools (McKinney, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to understand the perceptions of school principals and school district superintendent surrounding truancy interventions implemented in urban Chicago school districts. The study aims to identify trends regarding the components and practices used to attempt to curb the current high rates of truancy among students. What do these individuals believe is effective? What do they

believe is ineffective? These trends, collected through interviews within a qualitative design, will address the gaps in literature identified by McKinney (2012), particularly the insufficient amount of scientific inquiry into why truancy interventions have failed in the past.

Because the current study will use an exploratory case study methodology, its goal is to represent the perceptions of all participants through trends gleaned from their responses. The current study does not seek to determine relationships between variables or to establish causality between truancy intervention programs and truant behaviors. Instead, its goal is to give a detailed description and understanding of these interventions from the perspectives of professionals representing different aspects of students' school lives, so that the results may be used by future investigators attempting to improve such programs.

Theoretical Framework

Van Breda (2014) conducted a study analyzing the factors related to truancy among U.S. students. In order to facilitate the study, the researcher conceptualized the phenomenon of truancy within the bio-ecological systems theory, a theoretical framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1989). According to Hong et al. (2011) and van Breda, the bio-ecological systems theory is based on the belief that the psychosocial lives of individuals, especially the youth, are significantly affected by the various influences they are exposed to in different contexts. Hong et al. and van Breda enumerated Bronfenbrenner's five systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. All five systems influence children both individually and in interaction with one another.

According to Hong et al. (2011) and van Breda (2014), the microsystem is composed of the individual's immediate environment and surroundings, such as the home or the school. The mesosystem describes places or situations that link two or more microsystems—for example, when families become involved with school activities, overlapping one's home and school lives. The macrosystem refers to contexts that do not directly affect an individual but have important implications for the microsystems in which they exist—for example, the political context that shapes how schools or families operate. The exosystem refers to society at large, while the chronosystem refers to the element of time and how it changes an individual's contexts over a lifetime. Together, all these systems exert different influences on an individual, leading to changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

The current study will explore the perceptions of student truancy among different school district stakeholders, namely school principals and school district superintendents. These different individuals represent different contexts or systems that may influence students' truancy and the interventions to which they are exposed. Principals will be able to provide information on how truancy interventions are applied and viewed within their schools. Meanwhile, school district superintendents will be able to show how individuals representing a broader educational area may apply and perceive these interventions. Together, these perceptions represent different contexts that affect students. For this reason, a theoretical framework like Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, being inclusive of all these influences, is an appropriate guide and foundation for the present study.

This application of the bio-ecological systems theory is supported in literature by studies like that of Vaughn et al. (2013) that emphasize how truancy is influenced by the different contexts and systems to which students are exposed. Furthermore, according to McKinney (2013), factors ranging from personal to societal can cause truancy. The researcher noted that some students skip school because of personal adjustment concerns, while others avoid classes due to the fear of persecution and societal stigmas by their peers.

Research Question

Based on the needs of urban school districts and gaps in literature identified by previous research endeavors, the goal of the current study is to explore perceptions on existing truancy interventions in suburban schools. The research question for this study is as follows:

What are the current programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy, and what do district superintendents and school principals believe are the most effective methods for doing so?

Because the study is qualitative in nature, no hypotheses will be generated or referred to as standards against which to compare the participants' responses. The perceptions of all participants will be considered valid, absent any methodological inconsistencies.

Nature of the Study

The current study uses a qualitative design. According to Moretti et al. (2011) and to Streubert and Carpenter (2011), qualitative studies allow researchers to ask various open-ended questions, making fewer restrictions on both the methods of data collection

and the types of information that can be gleaned from participants. Qualitative studies allow researchers to gather rich information regarding the attitudes, perceptions, or experiences they attempt to investigate, helping them understand and describe these phenomena with more clarity and greater detail (Moretti et al., 2011; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Because the goal of this study is to explore school principals' and district superintendents' perceptions of truancy interventions in suburban school districts, a qualitative design that allows for the inclusion of any and all details regarding those perceptions will best aid in achieving the research objectives.

Specifically, this study will use an exploratory case study, which integrates various qualitative data-gathering techniques to accumulate detailed information on the unexplored perceptions of certain populations—in this case school principals and district superintendents (Mitchell & Jolley, 2012). For the purposes of the study, five individuals will serve as participants using sampling (Marshall & Rosman, 2011). These respondents will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews, conducted by the researcher, which will last for 45–60 minutes. After these interviews, the researcher will analyze the resulting data using thematic analysis, which will allow any trends in the responses to be identified (Esmaili, Cheraghi, & Salsali, 2013). As the study is conducted, ethical standards will be upheld through practices such as the acquisition of IRRB approval, the acquisition of informed consent, and the proper storage and destruction of collected data.

Significance of the Study

The current study addresses the gap in literature that McKinney (2013) emphasized. According to research for the current study, most investigations regarding truancy interventions have failed to question the reasons for the programs' effectiveness.

I have noticed that most studies have focused merely on whether interventions have minimized truancy. The present study addresses this concern by investigating the perceptions and opinions of specific stakeholders in student truancy—school principals and district superintendents. The study will incorporate more specific questioning about components of truancy intervention programs and why the respondents feel that they are effective or not.

The findings of the present study will have significant implications for multiple groups affected by truancy. First, the findings may become the basis for improving existing truancy interventions. This would benefit teachers, principals, and other school administrators needing new insight for the development or improvement of truancy programs. Second, if the findings of the present study effectively improve truancy programs, students will be less likely to engage in truant behavior, which would in turn make students less susceptible to long-term negative outcomes such as poor academic performance, dropout, unemployment, health concerns, and imprisonment, among others (McKinney, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012).

Definition of Key Terms

The present study attempts to understand the perceptions of school principals and district superintendents regarding existing truancy interventions in Chicago area urban schools. Because of the scientific approach to the research topic, certain terms used will have very technical meanings. For the purposes of the present study, the following terms will be defined as follows:

Bio-ecological Systems Theory

The bio-ecological systems theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner and is an explanation for the interactions among the individuals' different contexts, leading to people's unique experiences and behaviors (van Breda, 2014).

Urban School District

A urban school district refers to a geographic area containing various schools, located away from metropolitan or city areas (Borg, Borg & Stranahan, 2012). According to Borg, Borg, and Stranahan, urban school districts are often referred to as "low-poverty," not because their schools receive more state funding, but because their students tend to belong to wealthier families.

Truancy

The meaning of truancy varies among states due to differences in educational laws and policies. However, for the purposes of this study, the term refers to any unexcused or unverified absence, in this case by students who choose not to attend their classes for at least one day (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2013).

Truancy Interventions

Truancy interventions will refer to any programs or policies that are designed and implemented at a state- or district-wide level in order to reduce truancy. Such efforts may be part of larger interventions meant to address other school concerns (e.g., dropout rates and low academic achievement) (Spencer, 2011).

Summary

Truancy is a rampant problem within the U.S. educational system, leading to various negative outcomes for students such as poor academic performance, more

dropouts, unemployment, health concerns, imprisonment, and even decreased life spans (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012). Existing truancy interventions have not only proven ineffective, but also avoided investigations regarding their effectiveness. For this reason, the current qualitative study will attempt to describe and understand perceptions of truancy interventions from school principals and district superintendents. The current study will use an exploratory case study design, using interviews to gather data. Interview questions will be based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory that emphasizes the importance of considering different contexts affecting students' behaviors (van Breda, 2014). The findings of the current study are expected to benefit school officials attempting to improve existing truancy interventions, as well as students themselves, who risk various negative outcomes through truant behavior.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Extensive research has shown that school truancy has consistently been a major challenge facing many U.S. school districts and states (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2012). Current rates of student truancy remain high and continue to worsen in school districts across the country. Therefore, the problem needs to be addressed immediately; this is why truancy is the subject of this study.

A quality and comprehensive education is an absolute necessity to turn young people into successful family members, professionals, and citizens that can contribute to local and national economies. This is why there are hundreds of public school districts and thousands of individual public, private, and charter schools available for U.S. youth to receive a primary and secondary education. Having deemed an education so crucial to a citizen's life, career, and social and economic success, the United States established the first public school system in Boston in 1821. By 1900, 34 states had compulsory school attendance laws (Wang & Eccles, 2012). In a liberal democracy, where individual freedoms are held at a premium, there are actually not that many institutions that are required by law. Education is important enough to be one of those institutions. Though the required number of years varies from state to state, most has made it technically illegal not to attend school. This fact makes truancy a concern not only for school district superintendents, principals, and families, but also for law enforcement agencies (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2012). In fact, a significant proportion of all legal cases filed against youth offenders deals with the violation of local or state truancy laws (McKinney, 2012).

Truancy is the term school administrators and district superintendents use to indicate a violation of the mandatory school attendance law. While there is no overarching definition that every school district or state follows, a generally agreed-upon definition of truancy is an “unexcused absence from school.” Only parental or school permission is an accepted excuse for being truant from school in most states. For the purposes of this study, truancy refers to any unexcused or unverified absence by students for at least one day (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; McKinney, 2013). According to Wilcox, Angelis, Baker and Lawson (2014),

The U.S. national average for high school graduation falls considerably below that of numerous other industrialized nations and is marked by significant graduation rate gaps between students of higher and lower socioeconomic status and students attending suburban vs. rural or urban schools. The failure of youth to complete high school is a problem both for them and for the greater society as high school dropouts have lower earning power, higher rates of incarceration, and poorer health, with all the attendant consequences for themselves, their families, and society. (p. 3)

Such a grim perspective is echoed by other studies connecting high rates of truancy to larger numbers of students dropping out of school (Hauser & Koenig, 2011; Rumberger, 2011).

Statistics from national surveys demonstrate the excessively high degree of truancy in school districts across the United States. For example, beginning with the premise that school truancy is defined differently according to each state and jurisdiction, Flannery, Frank, and Kato (2012) reported that 4.3% of all ninth grade students

nationwide have reported engaging in truant behaviors, defined in this survey as “voluntarily skipping classes at least once in the month preceding the survey” (p. 118). This rate increases to 7.5% among 10th-grade students, 8.7% among 11th-grade students, and 13.0% among 12th graders, more than twice the truancy rate of freshmen (Flannery et al., 2012). That equals roughly 8 out of every 100 school-age students exhibiting regular truancy. Some recent researchers have pointed out that truancy has been an intractable problem in the United States for more than a century (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). These researchers noted that the United States has a high rate of truancy among its students relative to other nations. Furthermore, the United States’ policies designed to curb truancy are more tolerant, and its programs less strict. These attempts have been unsuccessful in the past two decades. Despite the significant amount of federal and state resources expended toward minimizing truancy in schools, it nevertheless remains a significant problem in the U.S. public education system (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Given the emphasis placed upon being educated and graduating from school, it is somewhat surprising that scholarly and academic literature has not studied truancy to a greater extent (Flannery et al., 2012; Maynard, McCrea, & Kelly, 2012). What is more, the studies that have been conducted remain at the level of generalities, focusing almost exclusively on the success or failure rates of truancy intervention programs, and not delving into the complex psycho-social factors that cause the problem in the first place (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015; Hans & Erikson, 2013; Haight, 2011). Research further points to how many intervention programs implemented across U.S. school districts are, unfortunately, overall failures (Flannery et al., 2012; Spencer, 2011). According to

McKinney (2013), most of the academic literature on truancy is too formal and general, focusing more on understanding the rates and factors of truancy among different demographics and segments of the student population (Ovnik, 2011; Larson, Zuel, & Swanson, 2011), rather than actually tackling the underlying factors causing school truancy.

The problem for this study is to thoroughly investigate the problem of school truancy in the United States by more specifically questioning the effectiveness of truancy interventions. In order to accomplish this, this study will interview two key stakeholder groups—principals and superintendents—and analyze their perceptions on the phenomenon of truancy, the intervention programs in place in their schools or school districts, and possibilities for diminishing truancy rates nationwide.

Rather than look simply to the success or failure of programs, the purpose of this study is to investigate the complex psycho-social factors and conditions that play a role in creating high truancy rates, as well as our stakeholders' understanding of these problems and others. The factors that contribute to truancy involve numerous relevant developmental influences, especially the interaction between two or more developmental factors—for example, the home-school, parent-principal, or parent-teacher relationship.

The problem and purpose of this study are to research school truancy and then discover the most sound and comprehensive policies and practices that have been conceived, developed, and implemented. The study will also examine how to develop effective school truancy policies and programs. By accomplishing these tasks, this study can help resolve the seemingly intractable problem of school truancy and the devastating effect it can have on students who miss out on the education necessary to become

successful individuals and productive citizens. If knowledge is power, then those who lack a comprehensive education lack that power.

To write this literature review, the following databases and search engines were used: ERIC Database, Google Scholar, PsychArticles, and regular Google. The key search terms and combinations of such terms and concepts input into these databases and search engines included the following: *school truancy*, *student truancy*, *principal and truancy*, *social work and truancy*, *district superintendent*, and *truancy*. Most of the literature included in this review was published between 2011 and 2015 to ensure that the latest findings and reports were included. Several seminal sources published before 2011 were also used.

In this literature review, I will provide an expanded background to the research problem discussed in the earlier chapter. The first section identifies the search strategy used to write the literature review. The second section identifies some key problems associated with school truancy, which add relevance to the rationale for this study. The third section identifies a complex, interrelated set of causal mechanisms that all contribute to school truancy and its related problems. The fourth section focuses on the theoretical framework of the study, which is the bio-ecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1993). Next, relevant studies will then be organized into categories, progressing from the broad subject matter toward the research gaps that will be identified and analyzed. In this process, stakeholder group analysis will be introduced, as well as an in-depth discussion of the identified groups that have an impact on school truancy—principals and district superintendents. A conclusion will also be provided in order to

discuss how the gaps were identified based on the existing scholarly literature on the topic.

Truancy and Problems Developed Late in Life

The reason truancy has been considered a major concern by schools and by state and federal government lies in its negative effects on students and the nation at large. Schoenberger (2012) outlined educational researchers' significant findings on truant behaviors. He noted that student truancy is significantly related to other future behaviors with negative implications. First, Schoenberger (2012) noted that students who engage in truant behaviors at a younger age tend to become less engaged with schoolwork and education in general. Researchers have connected this decreased engagement to higher dropout rates. Specifically, many have noted that students who tend to miss class in their earlier years tend to discontinue their education altogether, failing to finish high school or college. Schoenberger (2012) also noted that dropouts are more likely to earn lower average incomes than individuals who complete their education. Students who drop out demonstrate higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and health concerns. These health concerns lead to shorter life spans, according to Schoenberger (2012), indicating that truant behavior has implications not just for the academic goals of students and their families, but also on their physical well-being.

Causal Relationships Interconnected to School Truancy

Studies of school truancy have traced its causes to dysfunctional family life (van Breda, 2014a); students' lack of participation and engagement in school (Li & Lerner, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Knight & Thornberry, 2012); parental engagement or disengagement in their children's education (van Breda, 2014b; Wang &

Fredricks, 2014; Palardy, 2013; Zins, 2013); dysfunctional teacher-student relationships (Love, 2014; van Breda, 2014b); student mental illness and other psychological factors (Holtes, Bannink, Joosten-van Zwanenburg, van As, & Raat, 2015; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Vaughn, Wexler, Beaver, Perron, & Roberts, 2011); alcohol and drug abuse among students (Doria, Antonivk, Assumpcao, Fajardo, & Ehlke, 2015; Holtes, et al 2015; Barry, Chaney, & Chaney, 2011); school environment, including bullying (Havik, Bru, & Eresvang, 2015; Ervasti, Kivimaki, Puusniekka, Luopa, & Pentti, 2012), neighborhood and local community influences (Gottfried, 2012); school refusal (Hans & Erikson, 2013; Nuttall & Woods, K. 2013); school administration support, including the role of principals (Markham, Young, Sweeing, West, & Aveyard, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012); lack of adequate social worker interventions (Sugrue, Zuel, & LaLiberte, 2014; Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013; Blazer, 2011); the negative role peer groups can play (Hiatt, Laursen, Stattin, & Kerr, 2015), and even teen pregnancy (Zhou, Puradiredja, & Abel, 2015).

The problem of school truancy is complex and multi-faceted, implicating a variety of individuals and stakeholder groups, including students, parents, families, peer groups, community influences, school teachers, school principals, and social workers assigned to established cases of truancy. School atmosphere is likewise affected. In addition to these groups, school truancy is a major problem for both school district superintendents and other policy- and law-makers. The complex relationships between these individuals and groups play an especially important role in student truancy. A theoretical framework was needed that could account for not only the varied set of individuals and groups implicated in school truancy, but also how their interactions relate to the problems associated with

school truancy. Due to the complexity of the issue, our research led us to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1979; 1986; 1989), which will provide the appropriate theoretical framework for this study, as well as the appropriate analytical structure to account for all of the different individuals and groups associated with school truancy. The following section will provide a detailed description and analysis of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development. Further sections will describe and analyze how Bronfenbrenner's model can be specifically applied to the critical stakeholder groups identified: school principals and district superintendents.

Theoretical Framework

Prior to Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986; 1988) work on the ecology of human and child development, which argues for a totally holistic approach, different aspects of human development were studied exclusively by different academic professions: Psychology studied the child, and sociology the family. Anthropology concerned itself with society and culture. Meanwhile, economic conditions and political frameworks and structures were the province of the political scientist. With this separation of specialties, it was not too common for sociologists and psychologists, for example, to link their respective studies in order to gain a better understanding of child development. Rejecting such academic and theoretical dualisms, separatism and isolationism, Bronfenbrenner's (1993; 1994) ecological approach took an inclusive, cross-theoretical, holistic perspective, realizing that the best understanding of human and child development could be gained only if the individual's psychological development was seen through the complex set of structures, environments, contexts and systems that surround the child and impact its development. These contexts included one's family, society, culture, and the

economic and political systems of one's country. Since all of the different structures and processes either directly or indirectly affect child development, individual development cannot be seen as distinct from those surroundings, contexts, and systems. Rather, it is an integral, inseparable part of them.

The human ecology approach to child development, spearheaded by Bronfenbrenner et al. (1993; 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), radically altered the manner in which many social and behavioral scientists approached the study of human beings and the contextual environments through which they grow and develop. This holistic approach to the study of human development created entire new areas of scholarly research while also extending to public policy initiatives that have had a profound impact on child and family welfare in the United States and around the world.

An ecological system is a collection of interrelated parts and processes, integrated in order to accomplish an overarching goal, or at least to maintain a system's homeostasis, its balance. The family as an ecosystem includes individuals, their parents, and their siblings, but also extends to aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and others, all interrelated and interconnected. This family ecosystem has boundaries that come in contact with other systems, such as the school, the community, or the national economy.

For Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), a family system is a one-of-a kind collection of integrated components and functions, each acting toward valued common goals. The practically infinite combinations of personality characteristics and social and cultural ideologies unique to each family lend it its inimitable nature.

The individual school that a child attends is a system, as is the broader school district. The major components of the individual school are the teachers, principals,

coaches, administrative staff, custodial staff, and others. The family and school systems interact (or should interact) on a regular basis.

Bronfenbrenner emphasized the importance of the social environments in which children are raised, and saw the breakdown of the family as leading to the ever-growing rates of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency, and violence among American youth. His work led to new directions in research and in the design of programs and policies affecting the well-being of children and families (New World Encyclopedia, 2015, p. 243).

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1998; 2005) bio-ecological model of human development, a child's development results from complex and dynamic processes among various social contexts with which an individual interacts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) defined an individual's interactions with "persons, objects, and symbols in his or her immediate environment as 'proximal processes,' (p. 994) and posited that these processes are the primary mechanisms for development. However, individual characteristics and contexts can cause the effects of these processes to vary substantially. In the later parts of his research, Bronfenbrenner placed special emphasis on the proximal processes for understanding of human/child development.

Consistent with his theoretical holism, Bronfenbrenner's life work integrated two mutually reinforcing topics: (a) the development of theory and corresponding research design programs at the cutting edge of the science of human development; (b) the application of human ecology developmental theory to numerous practical contexts, such as U.S. public policy initiatives. In other words, Bronfenbrenner was a master at linking

theory and practice. A prime example of his ability to translate that theory into operational research models and effective social policies is his role as co-founder of the United States' Head Start Program. Begun under the Lyndon Johnson administration in 1964, the program was tasked with developing strategies to counteract the effects of child poverty and give poor children the same educational opportunities as those from better socioeconomic conditions. According to the government's Office of Head Start, a subsection of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

Head Start was...reauthorized again in 2007 with bipartisan support. The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 has several provisions to strengthen Head Start quality. These include alignment of Head Start school readiness goals with state early learning standards, higher qualifications for the Head Start teaching workforce, State Advisory Councils on Early Care and Education in every state, and increased program monitoring, including a review of child outcomes and annual financial audits. The Head Start training and technical assistance system was redesigned to support programs through six National Centers and a state-based system to ensure success. (p. 1)

The Head Start Program has been one of the most successful and longest-running programs geared toward arresting the cycle of poverty across the nation. Its adoption and integration into American society has not only fought poverty, but also benefitted the U.S. educational system (Mead, 2014; Walker, 2013).

Even though Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for studies involving school truancy and its related problems, few studies in the literature utilize the benefits of this model. Some studies that have taken

advantage of the bio-ecological model include the work of McKenzie, Kotch, and Lee (2011), who used the model as a theoretical framework for their study on the etiology of child maltreatment, as well as Hong, Algood, Chiu, and Lee (2011), who used it to investigate the topic of foster care and foster parents.

Stakeholder Group Analysis

This study will extend the application of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model to the study of school truancy by applying it to an in-depth analysis of our two stakeholder groups—school principals and district superintendents—and their understandings, perceptions, and involvement in the problems associated with school truancy.

Principals

School principals form part of an individual's micro-system; they interact directly with students. Principals form an interesting group because, in addition to directly interacting with students, they also have connections to teachers and parents, and so are often involved in multiple micro-systems simultaneously. These connections between school principals, teachers, and parents form part of the child's meso-system.

School principals can have an impact on truancy rates through the school policies they put in place, whether general or specific. The former involve school policies that create either a warm and inviting atmosphere for students, or one that is hostile to the creation and development of bonds students should form with their schools. When students feel disconnected or alienated from school programs, they have a tendency to begin skipping class and ending up as cases of truancy misbehavior (Habeeb, 2013).

A more specific area in which principals' attitudes and perceptions are important is the teacher-student relationship. Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg's (2015) research investigated the impact that classroom management had on students' positive or negative response to teachers. The hypothesis was that the less students respected their teachers, and the less they became engaged in the classroom, the more school-refusal and truancy-related issues resulted. An extensive survey of 5,465 students from the 6th–10th grades was conducted. The sampling selection process included participants who self-reported being absent from school more than three times during a three-month period. The results of the survey demonstrated a number of issues directly relevant to principals' school policies and actions in dealing with truancy. First, the findings showed that the way teachers managed their classrooms, a matter often decided in committees involving principal input, had a direct impact on students' decisions to refuse school and become truant. The survey also found that students who felt excluded and were unable to integrate into the school atmosphere were more apt to refuse school and skip classes or even entire days. Principals' standards and school policies have a great deal to do with creating that school atmosphere.

Habeeb (2013) drew attention to the fact that if a ninth grade student was a truancy problem, he or she also had discipline referrals, failures, and retentions. These troubling statistics heighten the need for schools, and the principals that lead them, to develop more proactive and comprehensive transitioning programs for eighth grade students to successfully transition to high school. Habeeb's (2013) research showed that the poorer the transition program, the more likely that first-year high school students would not feel connected to the school. As a result, they would become disengaged and

start to skip classes, eventually skipping days of school altogether. According to Habeeb (2013), the academic studies that focus on the problems of rough transitions to high school, decreased student engagement, and subsequent higher rates of truancy are not well researched. In other words, gaps in the literature exist due to a lack of concentrated research on the complex interrelationships between school transition programs (often developed in part by principals), student engagement, and problems associated with high school refusal, truancy, and dropout rates.

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) conducted a study using data collected from six states: Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, and Rhode Island. The researchers wanted to determine how school districts in these six states measured and recorded school truancy. What they found was that those occurrences were not measured in any uniform matter using sound quantitative analysis.

Keeping good records and analyzing school truancy rates is the responsibility of school principals and district superintendents across the country. Unfortunately, the results of Balfanz and Byrnes's (2012) extensive analysis showed that these problems are not measured in an adequate or definitive way nationwide. Their conclusion was that,

Because it is not measured, chronic absenteeism is not acted upon. Like bacteria in a hospital, chronic absenteeism can wreak havoc long before it is discovered. If the evidence in this report is borne out through more systematic data collection and analysis, that havoc may have undermined school reform efforts of the past quarter century and negated the positive impact of future efforts. (p. 4)

According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), academic literature dealing with the causes and prevention of school truancy and chronic school absenteeism fails to fully address a

number of problems. One major issue is the lack of sound quantitative measurement tools in every school district. If implemented, these systems could keep close tabs on which students skip class, skip school, are regularly truant, or display chronic absenteeism.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of school truancy and dropout prevention programs, Burzichelli, Mackey, and Bausmith (2011) conducted a lengthy research analysis of school districts in the Mid-Atlantic region of the country (Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland, and Washington, D.C.). School enrollment regularly numbers in the hundreds of thousands in this densely populated part of the United States. Once enrolled in school, those children are supposed to attend. The study found that,

The most common service goals were to improve academic performance (95 percent of programs), decrease truancy (66 percent), and provide support during transitions (60 percent)...The most common student subgroups targeted were students with academic needs (90 percent of programs), students from low socioeconomic status families (60 percent), and special needs students with behavioral challenges (57 percent). (p. 1)

The research also showed that 78% of school principals were actively involved in developing and implementing school truancy and dropout prevention programs. The overall results indicated major problems with the way these programs are advanced and realized.

Every school principal needs to be aware of the programs put in place to combat school truancy and school dropout, as well as how effective those programs are. Burzichelli et al. (2011) suggested that, given the amount of time, effort, research, and

money invested in such programs, these interventions are not as successful as they should be. As the study's findings suggested, perhaps too much emphasis is placed on academic achievement, as opposed to student truancy and school dropout. Perhaps 66% is not enough. Perhaps principals and school superintendents in the Mid-Atlantic region should pay closer attention to studies such as Burzichelli, Mackey, and Bausmith's (2011) investigation into truancy and dropout intervention programs (Markham, Young, Sweeing, West, & Aveyard, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

The actions (or inactions) of school principals, especially those regarding policies and procedures affecting their schools' atmospheres, can have a profound impact on whether students will feel uncomfortable at school and start skipping classes or even entire days. School principals' perceptions of these policies and procedures are crucial for gaining a better understanding of the host of issues related to school truancy. School principals form part of students' micro-systems as well their meso-systems, and so their input into the problems of school truancy is crucial. Principals also have connections to another of the students' meso-systems; namely, social workers, who are assigned to work with families and students when school truancy is an issue.

School District Superintendents

Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon (2013) began their study with the assumption that,

Although truancy is commonly reported as a risk factor for substance use, delinquency, dropout, and a host of other negative outcomes for youth, there has been surprisingly little empirical investigation into understanding the causes and correlates of truancy using large, nationally representative samples. (p. 766)

The 2009 *National Survey on Drug Use and Mental Health* surveyed 17,482 school-age adolescents who reported skipping school in the 30 days prior to the study. The study draws attention to “the prevalence of truancy and examines individual, school engagement, parental, and behavioral correlates of truancy,” all factors that district administrators need to understand in order to construct sound school truancy intervention programs in their school districts. Nuttal and Wood’s (2013) study demonstrated connections between school children and “psychological support, family support, professional, and systemic factors.” Systemic factors would include policy, procedures and programs, which school district administrators would largely design, or at least have strong opinions for. Major gaps in the literature exist regarding the role school district administrators play in truancy prevention. To address that gap, one line of potential research would be to gather school district administrators’ perceptions of the truancy intervention programs used in their own districts in order to determine what they think may work and may not work to combat truancy.

The research conducted by Gleich-Pope (2014) identified major gaps in theory and practice regarding the development and enforcement of school truancy laws. The typical response to school truancy is “the student's removal from school rather than troubleshooting the bigger issues that led to their absenteeism” (p. 110). In fact, truancy laws, when enforced, actually hold the family legally accountable, rather than focusing on the causes of school truancy (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014).

A debate currently rages in many state legislatures, one in which proponents of strong-armed enforcement of truancy laws argue with those against such methods (Gleich-Pope, 2014). Every school district administrator should consider the difficult

issues involving either the enforcement of truancy laws, which hold parents legally accountable, or the decision to instead spend public money on intervention programs. Administrators must weigh such issues because they serve as lynchpins between macro-system issues of treating truancy as a crime and meso-system issues related to how school principals and teachers deal with truant behavior in their pupils.

Maynard, McCrea, and Kelly (2012) began their research with the assumption that,

Although numerous and significant steps have been taken at the local, state, and national levels to reduce truancy, the rates of truancy have at best remained stable or at worst been on the rise, depending on the indicator utilized to assess truancy rates. (p. 23)

With the goal of systematically analyzing school truancy intervention programs, Maynard, McCrea, and Kelly (2012) state that,

It is imperative that we systematically synthesize and examine the evidence base to provide a comprehensive picture of interventions that are being utilized to intervene with chronic truants, to identify interventions that are effective and ineffective, and to identify gaps and areas in which more research needs to be conducted to better inform practice and policy. (p 24)

After closely analyzing 28 studies conducted on school truancy intervention programs, Maynard, McCrea, and Kelly (2012) concluded that,

...although the interventions included in this study were, overall, found to be effective, the mean rates of absenteeism at posttest in most studies remained above acceptable levels. This finding indicates the need for additional work and

research. Developing more effective interventions and policies as well as studying outcomes of interventions, particularly with vulnerable and at-risk populations, is crucial to combating absenteeism.

This call for more research in the areas of public policy, where school district administrators have much influence, is echoed in other research studies (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughan, & Peters, 2012; Huck, 2011).

Conclusion

This literature review focused on the topic of school truancy. While recognizing the overall lack of scholarly works devoted to the school truancy problem, this literature review set out to identify and analyze the existing literature on the topic. School truancy is a major problem confronting school districts across the United States. The specific goal of this literature review was to uncover relevant scholarly work concerned with school truancy, specifically as it applies to our major stakeholder groups—school principals and school district superintendents. These groups impact truancy issues and truant students at different levels. The perceptions and actions of principals exist mainly at the level of the micro- and meso-systems, or set of contexts, of students' school participation. School district superintendents, by contrast, work on the exo-system level, exerting an indirect but nevertheless crucial impact on student truancy and other related problems. Just as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and all his colleagues suggested, analysis should focus on the “proximal processes,” or the interrelated sets of relationships existing between different components of the system, in order to get a better understanding of school truancy. As we have seen, principals share relationships with both teachers and parents, and these three groups need to work together if the set of psycho-social problems related to school

truancy are to be properly addressed. Likewise, the policies and district-wide programs typically implemented and managed by school district administrators affect the exo-systems of students. Consistent with the bio-ecological model of human/child [educational] development, the actions of each one of these individuals and groups has an impact on the others through which they are connected. The present study will begin to more specifically question the effectiveness of school truancy programs, and delve deeper into the problems by investigating the perceptions and opinions of school principals and school district superintendents, as well as the role each group can play in developing more effective school truancy intervention programs.

Furthermore, by more specifically questioning particular components of truancy intervention programs and the stakeholders' feelings as to why they are effective or not, the findings of the present study will have significant implications for various individuals affected by truancy. First, the findings may become the basis for improving existing truancy interventions, which would be useful for teachers, principals, and other school administrators in need of new information and insights. Second, should truancy programs be effectively improved based on the findings of the present study, then students will be less likely to engage in truant behavior, making them less susceptible to the long-term negative outcomes that come with it (e.g., poor academic performance, dropout, unemployment, health concerns, and imprisonment) (McKinney, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012). Put succinctly, the findings of the current study are expected to help not only school officials attempting to improve existing truancy interventions, but also students who expose themselves to various negative outcomes when they engage in truant behaviors.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Truancy has been a prevalent concern in the U.S. educational system for more than a century. Compared to other nations, the United States has a relatively high truancy rate, despite the significant amount of federal and state resources expended to address the problem (Vaughn et al., 2013). Truancy is not only an educational concern, but also a legal one, with 43 states regarding it as a juvenile offense. As of 2010, truancy accounted for 36% of all juvenile offense cases in the United States (Flannery, et al., 2012; McKinney, 2013). Moreover, truancy has been linked to various negative outcomes for students, such as poor academic performance, school attrition, unemployment, decreased financial capacity, alcohol and drug abuse, health concerns, and shorter life spans (McKinney, 2013; Schoenberger, 2012). A review of existing literature indicated that previous studies have focused on the rates and factors of truancy affecting different demographics. Studies on specific truancy interventions have determined whether these measures have minimized the problem, but have not questioned why or how the interventions were effective.

With that in mind, the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study is to gather data on the perceptions of four school principals and one district superintendent regarding the truancy interventions enforced and implemented in nine suburban Chicago-area school districts. I will use that data to generate trends regarding the components and practices that are effective (or ineffective) in curbing truancy among students. This chapter will discuss the methodology implemented to achieve these goals. The chapter begins with a restatement of the research question and a discussion of the chosen research design and its appropriateness for the purpose of the study. The chapter will also contain

sections on the population of the study and the sampling strategy used to recruit participants. The data collection and analysis procedures will also be discussed. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the study's assumptions and limitations, validity and reliability, and the policies and procedures that will be implemented to comply with the standards for ethical academic research.

Research Design

Based on the purpose of the study, it was determined that the qualitative method is the most appropriate. Quantitative methodology was not chosen for this study because a quantitative study would involve formulating a theory or hypothesis and collecting data to test these hypotheses (Mitchell & Jolley, 2012). . Data collection for qualitative studies comes in the form of participants' observations and generalizations, with conclusions drawn from these observations (Bansal & Corley, 2011; Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). As such, qualitative researchers concentrate on accumulating contextualized descriptions of the subject(s) under investigation. Forming these descriptions into narratives, qualitative researchers gather information on the participants' attitudes toward, perceptions of, or experiences with the subject under investigation. This helps the researcher understand the phenomena with more clarity and describe it in greater detail (Moretti et al., 2011; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011).

Among the different qualitative research designs, the case study method was determined the most appropriate for this study. A case study is used to analyze people, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems holistically, by one of several methods (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The use of the case study design allows the researcher to examine the phenomenon within its particular context, offering a

more in-depth understanding of an issue (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014). Lastly, case studies require multiple sources of evidence to develop an in-depth description of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014). In this study, data on the truancy interventions implemented in five urban school districts will be collected from two groups representing different perspectives on the same subject: district superintendents and school principals.

Restatement of Study Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study is to gather data on the perceptions of school principals and district superintendents regarding the truancy interventions enforced and implemented in five urban Chicago-area school districts. The researcher aims to use the data gathered from these individuals to generate similarities or differences regarding the components and practices that are effective (or ineffective) in curbing truancy among students. To achieve these goals, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: What are the current programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy, and what do district superintendents and school principals believe are the most effective methods for doing so?

Also in this chapter are discussions of the implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

Setting and Sampling

This study was conducted in multiple districts in Illinois. The districts were chosen based on their social economic status as well as diversity. The ethnic breakdown includes an equal distribution of Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic students.

To recruit participants for the study, the researcher implemented a convenience sampling strategy within a purposive sample. The use of a purposive sample means that the researcher focused recruitment efforts on a particular group of individuals who fulfill characteristics relevant to the purpose of the study and to the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yang & Banamah, 2013). In this case, purposive sampling focused on two groups of individuals, namely the district superintendents and school principals from the nine suburban school districts where truancy interventions are being implemented. A convenience sampling strategy is defined as “locating any convenience cases who meet the required criteria and then selecting those who respond on a first-come-first-served basis until the sample size quotient is full” (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). The convenience sampling strategy was chosen based on the assumption that it would result in volunteers for the study, who are assumed to be more proactive and willing participants (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2014).

The researcher recruited a sample size of five interview participants, made up of one district superintendent and four school principals. The sample size was determined based on such considerations as saturation and diminishing returns for data collection, as well as the nature of data collection and analysis for qualitative studies. The concept of saturation states that collecting larger volumes of data does not necessarily equate to more significant or relevant data (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). Similarly, the concept of diminishing returns means that at a certain point, collecting more data does not necessarily provide the benefit of new information. Based on the experience of most qualitative researchers who collect data through interviews, little new information is collected after five participants have been interviewed (Marshall & Rosman, 2011; Price,

Jordan, Prior, & Parkes, 2011). Lastly, given that data collection and analysis for qualitative studies is quite labor intensive, a sample size of five participants is considered adequate to collect data on detailed accounts of personal experiences (Silverman, 2011).

Instrumentation

The researcher collected data through individual interviews with the study participants, facilitated by a semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions. The researcher chose to use open-ended questions to allow the study participants to articulate their perspectives and relate their experiences using their own words. The use of open-ended questions also allows the participant to broach aspects of the topic that close-ended questions may not bring up. A structured questionnaire helped the researcher, who also served as the interviewer, make sure that all aspects of the subject relevant to the study were discussed during the interview. Open-ended questions also served to protect the participants' rights, because they grant them the freedom to decide what information to share during the interview, depending on how comfortable they feel about articulating their perspectives and experiences about the subject under investigation.

Data Collection

As the first step in data collection procedures, the researcher ensured that all necessary permissions had been obtained. The researcher also underwent the approval procedures for the university's Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB) to ensure the study was conducted in accordance with the standards for ethical academic research. The researcher recruited participants by sending email invitations to the district superintendents and school principals for the nine suburban school districts included in

this study. The informed consent form was attached to each email invitation. The document provided the pertinent details of the study and the policies and procedures involved to preserve data confidentiality and protect participant welfare. Through the informed consent form, the researcher informed study participants that all interviews would be audio recorded for data collection and analysis and that they would be asked to review and approve the transcripts of their interviews.

Interested individuals were asked to respond to the invitation email. After receiving responses, the researcher contacted the interested individuals to schedule the interview. The meetings occurred at a time, date, and place agreeable both the researcher and the participant.

During each scheduled interview, the researcher reiterated the policies and procedures listed on the informed consent form, and then asked the interviewee to sign the informed consent letter and the waiver for the audio recording and subsequent transcript of the interview. After these preliminary measures had been completed, the researcher proceeded with the interview. Once all the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed the interviews and sent them to the interviewees for their corrections and clarifications. The interviewee's signature at the end of each transcript indicated approval. Only transcripts signed by interviewees were included. Once all transcripts were approved, the researcher proceeded with data analysis.

Ethical Concerns

This study was conducted in compliance with the standards and regulations for ethical academic research. A key aspect of this is obtaining informed consent from the participants, which was accomplished using the informed consent form attached to the invitation emails sent to prospective participants. By sending the form with the invitation letter, prospective participants were informed of the relevant details of the study, such as the purpose, the nature of participation required, the time commitment, and the policies and procedures that would be implemented to preserve data confidentiality and protect participant privacy. As such, interested individuals were given the chance to make an informed decision whether to participate in the study.

In addition, the following policies and procedures were implemented to comply with standards for ethical academic research. First, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasized; participants did not receive any compensation or incentives for their role in the study. Likewise, individuals suffered no negative social, economic, or job-related consequences as a result of declining to participate. Second, participants decided how much information they were willing to provide during the interviews. They could decline to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. Third, participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point by verbally informing the researcher of their decision. Any data collected from the participant up until that point would be discarded, and the signed informed consent form would be destroyed immediately. Fourth, the researcher de-identified all the data collected for the study to protect participant privacy. Instead the researcher used pseudonyms (i.e., Superintendent # 1, Principal # 1), and did not collect any information that could be used to identify the participants. Lastly, the data was stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's

office. Locked away were hard copies of the data, such as printouts of the transcripts and signed informed consent forms, as well as electronic files, such as the audio recordings of the interviews and drafts of the final dissertation. Similarly, electronic files were secured in password-protected files in the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher had access to all files. The data will be stored for five years after the completion of the study. After this time, the researcher will shred all hard copies of the data and permanently delete all electronic files.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on developing trends expressing the perceptions of school principals and district superintendents regarding both the *current* truancy interventions implemented in five urban Chicago school districts, as well as the *most effective* components of truancy interventions. The analysis used data collected from two groups representing two perspectives on the topic: district superintendents and school principals. The data collected from these participants was analyzed for convergent and divergent points.

To analyze the data, the researcher used NVivo v. 10.0, a qualitative analysis software program, and the Krippendorff method of content analysis (2013). Krippendorff (2013) defined content analysis as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (p. 403). The Krippendorff method of content analysis involves six steps, described in the table below, and was designed to help qualitative researchers conduct data analysis that is objective and uninfluenced by natural human biases (Krippendorff, 2013). Using the data collected from the participants, the researcher obtained basic units of meaning and formulated trends that were supported and

interpreted based on the interview transcripts. The results of the analysis formed the basis for addressing the study's research questions.

Table 1

Krippendorff method of content analysis

Step	Procedure
1	Researcher completes the following tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the bounds of the study and the context in which the study will be conducted • Specify what is unknown, but directly observable in the study • Delimit the study findings to the contexts or settings where the conclusions are applicable • Itemize procedure for data analysis
2	Identify the units for data analysis
3	Design sampling strategies to reduce impartialities in the data collected
4	Code the data by classifying units of analysis into categories of chosen analytical constructs based on the criteria of reliability of relevance
5	Decide how the coded data relates to the phenomena under investigation, restricting inferences to aspects of the topic that are not directly observable
6	Validate inferences based on the data collected from the respondents based on their responses to the online survey

Assumptions and Limitations

The researcher conducted this qualitative, exploratory case study based on two assumptions. First, the researcher assumed that the participants would respond candidly during the interviews and provide valid and reliable data. Second, the researcher assumed that the study participants were representative of the study population. Because data collection for this study depended on convenience sampling, the sample might not accurately represent the population of the study (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2014), and could result in “unwanted generalizations” (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). Third, as a particular weakness of the case study design, there is concern that a study could be too broad in

scale. This requires the researcher to properly articulate the contexts in which the findings and conclusions could be applied or generalized. Lastly, this study focused on several urban districts within Chicago, Illinois. As such, it is acknowledged that the social, economic, and political conditions of this setting may vary from that of others, and that the perceptions and experiences of the participants may not hold true for the issue of truancy in other areas.

Validity and Reliability

The findings of qualitative studies must accurately reflect the phenomenon under investigation and be supported by evidence (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). As such, validity and reliability in this study were achieved through data triangulation, which involves using multiple sources of data on the same subject. This was achieved by collecting data from two groups of individuals (district superintendents and school principals) representing different perspectives on the issue of truancy and truancy interventions. While data triangulation is implemented in some studies to determine consistency across data sources, it is also useful for identifying points of convergence within the data (Denzin, 2012). Points of convergence support the overall validity of a study's findings, while points of divergence provide opportunities to uncover deeper meanings in the data (Guion et al., 2011). Lastly, the validity and reliability of the study is also enhanced by the policies enforced to protect participant privacy and data confidentiality (Farqhar & Michels, 2014). These policies encourage participant honesty, which contributes to the overall validity and reliability of the data collected.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was twofold: to gather data on the perceptions of school principals and district superintendent regarding the truancy interventions implemented in five urban school districts, and to generate trends regarding the effective and ineffective components of those interventions. Data was collected from a sample of five participants, one district superintendent and four school principals from five urban school districts in which truancy interventions were being implemented. Individual interviews were conducted, and the data was analyzed using the Krippendorff method of content analysis. The results of the data analysis will be discussed in detail in the next chapter of this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter 4 of the study presents the qualitative data analysis of the interviews regarding the effectiveness of current programs to combat absenteeism and truancy in the districts and schools of superintendents and principals. A total of five interviews, one with a superintendent and four with school principals, were conducted. The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of the participants to determine the impact of truancy interventions. Data analysis began after collecting all the responses from the five interviews. A qualitative content analysis was done following Krippendorff's (2013) six-step method. In addition, the NVivo10 program by QSR was used to help systematically code the participants' interviews, allowing the organization and tabulation to be more accurate than it would with traditional coding. This chapter also includes information on the demographics of the participants, the data collection process, the presentation of findings with the verbatim quotes from the interviews, and the summary of the whole chapter. To guide the study, the following research question was asked:

RQ: What are the current programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy, and what do district superintendents and school principals believe are the most effective methods for doing so?

Demographics

Five school leaders—one district superintendent and four school principals—were interviewed in order to gather their firsthand knowledge and perceptions on the effectiveness of current programs meant to prevent absenteeism and truancy in their schools. Table 1 contains the breakdown of the sample, including the gender, position,

grade levels, and the research question connected to the participants. Overall, interviews included one male and four females who handled schools ranging from pre-K to the 12th Grade. SI Participant 1 refers to the superintendent, and SP Participants 1-4 were the school principals.

Table 2

Breakdown of the sample

	Gender	Position	Grade Levels
SI Participant 1	Male	Superintendent	K–12
SP Participant 1	Female	Principal	Pre K–12
SP Participant 2	Female	Principal	Pre K–6
SP Participant 3	Female	Principal in a Middle School	N/A
SP Participant 4	Female	Principal in a Middle School	N/A

Data Analysis

Data were gathered from five school leaders: one superintendent and four principals. After interviewing the participants, the researcher used Krippendorff’s (2013) six steps to analyze the data. The researcher then completed the first stage by defining the limitations and nature of the study and listing the other procedures for the data analysis. In the second and third steps, the researcher identified the units for the data analysis and the sampling methods to reduce biases within the data, respectively. For the fourth step, the researcher coded the data by classifying the interview responses according to their relevance and their significance to the research of the study. In the fifth step, the researcher again reviewed data and grouped them according to their programs while

determining any relationships or networks. Finally, for the last stage, the researcher validated and presented the findings.

Presentation of Findings

Programs in Place: Results from the Interviews with the School Principals

Interviews with the school principals yielded descriptions of five different interventions used in their schools. Only one of these interventions was listed by all four principals: the presence of attendance or truancy officers. The four remaining programs were used in either one or two of the principals' schools. These four interventions were as follows: (1) Cooperation with different agencies; (2) A restorative justice program, through which students can earn a second chance; (3) A ripple program focusing on behavioral concerns; and (4) Cooperation with communities. Table 3 contains the breakdown of the programs listed by the principals.

Table 3

Programs in place according to the school principals

Trends	Number of Occurrences (<i>n=4</i>)	Percentage of Occurrences (<i>n=4</i>)
Program 1: Presence of attendance or truancy officers	4	100%
Program 2: Cooperation with different agencies	2	50%
Program 3: Restorative justice program, second chance for students	2	50%
Program 4:	1	25%

Ripple program focusing on behavioral concerns		
Program 5:	1	25%
Cooperation with communities		

Program 1. Presence of attendance or truancy officers.

Data showed that the most common programs employed was the presence of attendance or truancy officers. This program received four occurrences, or 100% of the total sample population of principals. Participants agreed that the close monitoring of these attendance and truancy officers allowed progress in their programs. SP Participant 1 stated that they have attendance officers present in her school:

I don't know an exact dollar amount, but I do know that they had allocated ... We have truancy officers. We don't have one per building, but we do have shared truancy officers that we can call that can go make home visits, along with our social workers, but I don't know the exact budget that we have.

SP Participant 2 echoed that her school also has attendance and truancy officers in place:

Yes. We have attendance officers in most of our buildings, and they make frequent contact with parents when it becomes apparent that there may be a truancy issue developing. We also have a partnership with the police department that really probably focuses more on the older students in our district, but they will intervene with families even of younger children where chronic truancy problems start to develop.

SP Participant 3 stated that they have attendance officers in each of their buildings who also work closely with other staff members and administrators in monitoring the truancy and absenteeism programs:

We do have a truancy program at the school, city of Chicago Heights. We have attendance officers in each of our buildings. The attendance officers work closely with additional staff, counselors, social workers, et cetera.

SP Participant 4 shared that they have attendance officers in the building who monitor the tardiness and absence of each student in the school:

We review the attendance. The attendance officer looks at it based on the number of tardiness and absences of each student, and then contacts, first of all, the student. The process is to meet with the student to see if they're experiencing any challenges as a family, [on the] home front, and then from there they go to the parent. They have a meeting, a call-out meeting for the parent. They come, they meet with the truancy officer, learn the importance of having their child in school and how that might impact their ability to achieve in a school setting. Then they inform them of the state criteria for being in school.

Program 2: Cooperation with different agencies.

The next program, described by two of the participants (50% of the total sample population), involved cooperation with different agencies. SP Participant 1 stated that her school collaborates with other agencies to be more effective in addressing the issues on truancy:

Sure. We actually have a relationship with our police department for kids that we are having ... The habitual offenders. We have agencies within our district and our

community that we [partner] with that we can contact to make home visits. Our social workers within our district go and make home visits, as well, to reach out to parents to see what we can do to help with truancy problems. Our administrators also reach out, as well.

SP Participant 2 explained that they have officers per building and partnerships with different departments: “We also have a partnership with the police department that really probably focuses more on the older students in our district, but they will intervene with families even of younger children where chronic truancy problems start to develop.”

Program 3: Restorative justice program, second chance for students.

The next program listed by some of the interviewees was the inclusion of a restorative justice program, through which schools encourage giving students a second chance. Again, two of the participants, or 50% of the total sample population, were involved this approach. SP Participant 2 shared that they have also started establishing a restorative justice program that allows students to start fresh:

Yes, we do have a restorative justice program. It's new and it's getting off the ground, but that is an alternative for children with any type of behavioral problems. Not just attendance problems, and so that's a new program to us, as I said. We're starting at the high school and the middle schools and having youngsters who are having behavioral and social difficulties participate in that program to try and get themselves back on track and return to school, to the normal school day, normal school experience as quickly as possible. Using that as a real educational tool to help children understand what their difficulties are, how they can go about correcting them, and making the situation right, doing better in the future.

SP Participant 3 also declared that a restorative justice program is in place in her school:

Program 4: Ripple program focusing on behavioral concerns.

The fourth program described was the use of a ripple program focusing on students' behavioral issues. This program received just one occurrence, or 25% of the total sample population. SP Participant 1 stated that one of the main programs implemented is called the Ripple program, which teaches students and parents about the value of education and its long-term benefits:

We have a new program that our district has started. The name of it is [Ripple], and it's for all sorts of different behavioral concerns. One of them is truancy. It talks about the importance of being in school and being in school on time and how that kind of carries over into your lifelong skills. We try to put the kids through that program, bring parents in. We do have parent liaisons that we bring in to work with the parents, as well. We do send out contact letters after the fifth truancy to the parents to let them know that this is already an established problem, and to come in so we can see what we can do to prevent any further trancies.

Program 5: Cooperation with communities.

The last program listed involved encouraging cooperation with communities. Like the previous program, this received just one occurrence, or 25% of the total sample population. SP Participant 3 shared that her school reaches out to the community, especially to the parents of their students: "We reach out to the community. We work with our parents, and at this time we still have about a 15% truancy rate in our district."

Programs in Place: Results from the Interview with the Superintendent

Similar to the interviews with the four school principals, the interview with the school district superintendent produced five programs currently being used in his school district. In this case, these programs were as follows: (1) Mild to severe truancy programs; (2) Professional support and guidance for elementary students; (3) A more aggressive approach for older students; (4) Cooperation with different agencies; and (5) Saturday classes for high school students.

Program 1: Mild to severe truancy programs.

The superintendent expressed that programs in his district varied by grade level. He also shared that, depending on a student's case, a variety of mild to severe truancy programs could be used to address the issue. SI Participant 1 spoke about those various programs:

Yes, we do. It's a shared program with the various schools throughout our district and it ranges from mild truancy interventions up to more severe, where we take some very tough actions against the more truant students and families.

Program 2: Professional support and guidance for elementary students.

For elementary students, the superintendent stated that he employs professional support and guidance to help students overcome their issues and find the right path. SI Participant 1 also shared that other intervention programs include sending social workers and professionals to speak with the parents and the children once a pattern of truancy is observed:

In the elementary, our interventions include sending social workers, and nurses, and our principals to try to contact the children and parents, particularly parents,

when we start seeing a pattern of truancies take place. It's usually associated with absences as well, not just being truant.

Program 3: More aggressive approach for older students.

For the older students and higher grade levels, the superintendent described a more aggressive approach. He added that such methods for middle school students involve dealing with not only the students, but also the parents.

Program 4: Cooperation with different agencies.

The superintendent also cooperates with different agencies. He added that another program for the middle school students which they described to be a more aggressive approach is dealing with the students along with their parents: “In middle school, we wrap more mental health services around the student from community agencies and try to offer them to the parents in the home as well.”

Program 5: Saturday classes for high school students.

Finally, the last program the superintendent mentioned was conducting Saturday classes for high school students. SI Participant 1 shared that in his district, high school students are required to attend Saturday programs to make up for their absences: “Then in high school, we have started a program where the students have to come to Saturday programs and make up their time, and there's other kinds of punishments for being truant and being excessively absent.”

Most Effective Components of Intervention Programs: Perceptions of the School Principals

The four school principals interviewed for the current study listed four methods they believe to be the most effective in combating truancy. The most common of these

was described by three of the four participants. Table 4 lists the school principals' perceptions regarding the most effective tactics in programs to address attendance and truancy issues.

Table 4

Perceptions of school principals regarding the most effective strategies among interventions designed to improve attendance and prevent absenteeism and truancy

Strategy	Number of Occurrences (<i>n=4</i>)	Percentage of Occurrences (<i>n=4</i>)
Strategy 1: Proactive approach within students' homes	3	75%
Strategy 2: Use of skilled and trained workers to motivate the students	2	50%
Strategy 3: Partnerships with the police and court system	2	50%
Strategy 4: General meeting with stakeholders	1	25%

Strategy 1: Proactive approach within students' homes.

The most common theme among school principals' statements on effective methods for truancy interventions was the use of a proactive approach within students' homes. Three of the four principals interviewed—75% of the total population—believed this to be the most effective method of combating truancy. SP Participant 1 stated that intervention programs are more effective once the school involves homes and families:

We do have programs. We have community programs and family involvement programs that we are partnered with in our community to try to help with single families and just different diverse families to try to help with the issues of truancy. They can go into the homes, and that is strictly a volunteer program that if the parents agree with it they can go into the home and actually help them with those types of issues. [Well, it's kind of counter-intuitive because if you're suspending them, then they're not coming to school. It's kind of crazy.]

SP Participant 2 also stressed the importance of involvement in students' homes, which has yielded good results:

We do have a written agreement, memorandum of understanding, with our local police department and in the severe cases, they are more than willing to get involved with the family and to go to the homes and meet with the parents, talk with the children, depending on the age of the child, and when necessary facilitate the process of getting either child protective services or the juvenile courts involved in looking at what can be done to intervene. Sometimes that involves penalties for the student, for the parent, and it always involves close monitoring of the attendance. We've seen pretty good success with that so far.

SP Participant 3 declared that effectiveness is always dependent on the environment and cooperation of children's homes:

Well, I think that in these poor, urban districts where there are so many stressors on the family, it's so hard. School becomes not the most important aspect of the household, and trying to get these truant children back in class would certainly boost their academic achievement.

Strategy 2: Use of skilled and trained workers to motivate the students.

Another theme that followed in the principals' responses involved the dependence on skilled and trained workers to motivate the students. Two school principals, or 50% of the total sample population, brought up this method as an effective truancy deterrent. SP Participant 2 shared how her district has been fortunate enough to afford the services of retired police officers who help control students' behavior in their nine different buildings:

We've been very fortunate in the people that we've been able to hire for most of these positions. We have several former police officers working as attendance officers in our district, and the one that I have at my building is a former police officer. He's well trained in many aspects of interacting with the public, very familiar with the kinds of problems have in school, as well as the consequences of not attending school, and is very successful, really, in communicating with a family and being the frontline hands-on person with the parents and the child to get them to the bottom of whatever the problem is, and to help remedy the situation. Given the background and experience of most of the individuals that my district has hired as attendance officers, we've really been fortunate in that they're knowledgeable people.

SP Participant 3 highlighted the effectiveness of having well-trained and skilled attendance officers:

Well, our attendance officers are really quite good and are very well-known in the community. Parents and families know them, they know our neighborhoods. They work regularly with our counselors and our social workers and our teachers and

our parent liaisons. They talk to them about students that are habitually truant, and we try to wrap a full complement of services around those kids, everything from mental health to social workers to even assistance with ADC, Aid to Dependent Children and things of that nature that are available to them in the community. You know, I'm not sure what the attendance officers, what information they have. I believe that since we implemented the program of attendance officers in the district, we have seen a reduction in our truancy rate, but I would have to defer to my boss about that. I'm not sure.

Strategy 3: Partnerships with the police and court system.

Another effective method that received support from two of the four principals (50% of the population) involved forming partnerships with the police and court system. SP Participant 3 shared how their partnerships with these different government agencies have helped control their truancy and absenteeism rates:

We work very closely with the Chicago Police Department and the Chief of Police and we try to get parents involved and yes, we do, before we go through the court system, we really want to see if we can get our kids back into the classrooms.

SP Participant 4 described how the involvement of the police and court has helped decrease the truancy and absenteeism in her school:

Now in Chicago Heights, we did. We had a team of people that were included and a judge that was part of the team. It was a representative from the building level, there was a coach, actually part of it, the principal, the judge, or a representative from the court that was there. Again, the goal was to get the parent to understand

the importance of truancy, being an issue that impacts education. A lot of kids are involved in sports, so that's why the coach was there. It was like we were sending a message to them that it requires that they be in school...

Strategy 4: General meeting with stakeholders.

Finally, a method described by one principal as effective involved conducting a general meeting with stakeholders. SP Participant 4 expressed her thoughts on how meetings with all stakeholders—such as the school representatives, parents, and the judge—helped the students and families understand and monitor attendance and involvement in school:

It was very effective... The data was tracked. It decreased, the absences and tardiness decreased. Those meetings were facilitated at every building. It wasn't just one school involved, every building had a team of people.

Most Effective Components of Intervention Programs: Perceptions of the School District Superintendent

In answering the research question, the superintendent's beliefs and recommendations largely mirrored those of the school principals. The superintendent recommended the following: (1) Cooperation with different agencies; (2) Use of skilled and trained workers to motivate the students; (3) Partnerships with the court system; and (4) A proactive approach within students' homes.

Strategy 1: Cooperation with different agencies.

The district superintendent believed that the bringing in agencies and cooperating with them allowed positive changes to occur. SI Participant 1 admitted that although the changes seem to be few in number, he finds encouragement in how the different agencies

work together. He said that this cooperation may still allow some positive changes to happen in children's lives:

I would say it's not adequate, one of the things we've been doing, and I know you were going to ask me, is what kind of interventions have we done? We have started a juvenile summit team made up of the court system, various schools, the mental health, and various other agencies that come together on a very regular basis. Students and families are brought in and, collectively, we work as a team to try to see if we can have a community intervention on these trancies because no one agency or school is going to be able to successfully deal with this. By bringing the courts, and mental health, and the police, and the others together, we are able to at least cause some change that we couldn't do by ourselves. The schools rarely have enough power to do this by themselves, but all of us together; we've been able to have some success. Unfortunately, it's a pretty small number of kids because we just don't have enough resources or people to deal with it.

Strategy 2: Use of skilled and specialized workers to motivate the students.

Another effective method identified by the district superintendent involved depending on skilled and trained workers to motivate problematic students. He stated that the effectiveness of a truancy and absenteeism program depends on having the “skilled, trained, and passionate people” to put their knowledge and capabilities in action and change students who are at risk of truancy:

Yes, we have. We've looked at a variety of programs. If you've got a really good group of people, then the program is successful. It's just pretty hard to have a

cookie-cutter approach that we'd go out there and say, "Just do this, and it'll work."

It's usually somebody who's really engaged and who's engaging who can go out and get the families and kids back in school, and can network with others, and partner with the various agencies to say, "If everybody does a little bit, then we can all get a lot done."

The models are out there, but it really comes down to having those skilled, trained, passionate people who can get the job done on the street level.

Strategy 3: Partnerships with the court system.

The district superintendent also described the importance of forging relationships with the court, calling it the most effective approach. SI Participant 1 highlighted how such partnerships are able to force both children and families to follow the school guidelines:

Right, the court system is vital, because what they do is they're able to force the families into coming to school because at the end of the day if they don't, the families are held accountable. The court [is] the final arbiter of what's going to happen to these kids.

Strategy 4: Proactive approach within students' homes.

Finally, the district superintendent also argued for a proactive approach within students' homes. SI Participant 1 shared that if the families can cooperate and take an active role, the effectiveness of the program improves:

I guess I would say that the mental health aspect of some of these families, there's usually multiple layers of children. If you've got one child, you probably have

more than one child. If you can head off all the children before they get into truancy and other... Not just the worst first, that's just the problem we are always dealing with, the worst first. There's others, children that need to be dealt with before they become truant. Be more proactive earlier.

Chapter 4 of the study discussed the findings from the qualitative content analysis of interviews with five school leaders—one district superintendent and four school principals. Interviews with these participants were conducted in order to determine not only *what* truancy interventions were implemented in their schools or districts, but also what they believed to be *the most effective components* of those interventions.

The researcher used Krippendorff's (2013) six steps to complete the content analysis, and the computer software program NVivo10 for the organized coding and tabulation of the data. From the analysis it was then discovered that most of the school principals employed attendance or truancy officers in their buildings. In addition, some used a restorative justice program, and some cooperated with different agencies to reduce truancy in their schools. The superintendent identified five programs currently being used in his district: (1) Mild to severe truancy programs; (2) Professional support and guidance for elementary students; (3) A more aggressive approach for older students; (4) Cooperation with different agencies; and (5) Saturday classes for high school students.

When it came to the principals' and superintendent's perceptions of the most effective components of truancy interventions, responses more closely resembled each other. A proactive approach within students' homes was emphasized by both the principals and the superintendent. In addition, the use of skilled, trained workers and partnerships with court systems were also similarities in the participants' responses. The

next chapter will discuss the interpretations of the findings in relation to the literature, in addition to the implications, recommendations, limitations, and conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The final chapter of the study presents the findings established in Chapter Four while relating them to the available literature on the study. Krippendorff's (2003) six steps were used to perform a qualitative content analysis on five semi-structured telephone interviews. This was followed by coding and tabulation using NVivo10 by QSR. The following research question was formulated:

RQ: What are the current programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy, and what do district superintendents and school principals believe are the most effective methods for doing so?

Also in this chapter is a discussion of the implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

Summary of Findings

The qualitative content analysis showed that the school principals relied on the presence of attendance or truancy officers to help monitor the students closely in school. However, the most commonly described *effective* method, according to the principals, was a proactive approach within students' homes. An example of this type of method is sending teachers, staff members, or academic workers to inform the parents about their child's potential truancy issues and warn them before those issues reach a critical stage. Principals also advocated for the use of skilled, trained workers to motivate the students and develop partnerships with the police and court system.

The district superintendent and the schools in his district have implemented five programs to address truancy and absenteeism: (1) Mild to severe truancy programs; (2)

Professional support and guidance for elementary students; (3) A more aggressive approach for older students; (4) Cooperation with different agencies; and (5) Saturday classes for high school students. His perceptions regarding the most effective and successful components of truancy interventions closely resembled those of the principals: He also recommended a proactive approach within the students' home, as well as the use of skilled, trained professionals and partnerships with outside agencies, particularly the court system. In the next section, the results will be discussed in relation to current literature on the study findings.

Interpretation of Findings

RQ: What are the current programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy, and what do district superintendents and school principals believe are the most effective methods for doing so?

The analysis found that the school principals all employed truancy officers in their buildings to help monitor students and determine those at risk. According to Coleman and Yeh (2008), schools have started to recognize and acknowledge the "damaging effects" of high levels of absenteeism and truancy, and now appoint truancy officers to combat that issue. Such prevention programs were also supported by Shute and Cooper (2014), who wrote that "truancy officers, probation officers, and police officers" have started to work together to observe and "pressure" truants to improve their habits and attain educational success (p. 157). SP Participant 2 had the exact intervention in place:

We have attendance officers in most of our buildings, and they make frequent contact with parents when it becomes apparent that there may be a truancy issue developing. We also have a partnership with the police department that really

probably focuses more on the older students in our district, but they will intervene with families even of younger children where chronic truancy problems start to develop.

SP Participant 2 is just one of the four examples of how school principals have started to turn to professionals in addressing absenteeism, which can eventually lead to truancy.

One strategy that emerged in the descriptions of truancy interventions was the collaboration with different agencies, which Shute and Cooper (2014) also reported as the primary method to lead students back to the proper path after warnings and reprimands had failed. Feld (2014) discussed the stages involved in reporting truancy to higher levels, with schools, police, and courts all working together to monitor and respond to the misbehavior of the students. Feld (2014) explained that students' cases are brought to the police department once truancy officers have either proven an act of truancy or supervised and observed several at-risk juvenile students. Again, one example from the findings of the study is SP Participant 2's program, which she described: "We also have a partnership with the police department that really probably focuses more on the older students in our district, but they will intervene with families even of younger children where chronic truancy problems start to develop."

Another less-cited intervention effort was a restorative justice program where students were given second chances to start their educational lives anew. Ginsberg (2015) explained that such programs are taking shape across the country, as students from various schools have started to draft their proposals for restorative program funding. These students want to build and hone the leadership capabilities of students with truancy records, as well as help them get back their educational rights and receive credit for such

changes. SP Participant 3 was one of the two principals who shared the program: “We have a restorative justice program in our buildings that helps students who have chronic truancy issues.”

After finding out what programs were in place, the researcher delved deeper to investigate what these principals believed to be the most effective components of intervention programs. The qualitative content analysis determined that the proactive approach within students’ homes is still the most preferred and successful method for the school principals. Given that teachers, truancy officers, and schools are usually unable to monitor their students outside school, principals deemed it vital to involve the parents, families, and homes of the children, especially those at risk of truancy issues. Franklin, Harris, and Meares (2013) indicated the need for some schools to visit students’ homes in order to implement "family-based interventions" to increase children’s motivation to go to school (p. 399). The authors explained that through home visits, school representatives and staff are able to comprehend if a student’s home contributes to their absenteeism or truancy. The current study also suggests that prior to these home visits, parents could be provided with the information on the possible effects of truancy on children’s lives. The hope is that this knowledge may greatly encourage parents to be more proactive in their children’s lives and closely monitor them, even before they become at-risk.

Another intervention established through the research question was the schools’ dependence on skilled and trained workers to motivate their students. This is similar to the results dealing with the employment of truancy officers and partnerships with police and court representatives to encourage youth to reduce their absenteeism and go back to school. This also paralleled with another theme in the results: the effectiveness of forging

partnerships with the police and court system. Participants in the current study believed that the inclusion of these government departments has produced great successes for the schools. SP Participant 4 shared an example in which the police and a judge worked alongside a child's school, coach, and parents to encourage the child to gain interest and motivation:

Now in our district, we did. We had a team of people that were included and a judge that was part of the team. It was a representative from the building level, there was a coach, actually part of it, the principal, the judge, or a representative from the court that was there. Again, the goal was to get the parent to understand the importance of truancy, being an issue that impacts education. A lot of kids are involved in sports, so that's why the coach was there. It was like we were sending a message to them that it requires that they be in school...

In conclusion, school principals indeed have many different ways to address the issues of absenteeism and truancy in their schools. However, this research showed that they mostly employ attendance and truancy officers in order to more closely monitor the students.

These attendance officers are well-trained and skilled in supervising at-risk students.

Meanwhile, the school principals admitted that cooperation from children's parents and families was still more effective, especially in preventing and motivating at-risk students.

In the interview with the superintendent, the researcher identified five main programs in place to combat absenteeism and truancy: (1) Mild to severe truancy programs; (2) Professional support and guidance for elementary students; (3) A more aggressive approach for older students; (4) Cooperation with different agencies; and (5) Saturday classes for high school students.

First, the district superintendent explained how various truancy programs are used, depending on students' conditions and their potential to develop into truant students. Barlow (2011) explained that children indeed have stages of misbehaviors or disorders that can be differentiated into "mild" and "severe," with severe being those behaviors already deemed to cause harm to others. This split between "mild" and "severe" misbehavior is similar to how the principals evaluate the severity of reprimands for students. Again, all measures are taken in order to teach the students the importance of attending school and avoiding truancy.

Other programs in place included professional support and guidance for elementary students and cooperation with different agencies. These programs were similar to those used by the school principals in which attendance officers, police officers, court representatives, social workers, and nurses are employed to supervise and guide the students against absenteeism and truancy. Meanwhile, a more aggressive approach for older students was also employed. Again, as Barlow (2011) explained, when there are severe behaviors present that already cause harm to others, a more aggressive approach for the elementary students may be needed for these students to realize the effects of their absences and be reprimanded for them. Saturday classes for high school students were also in place to provide opportunities for the students to catch up with their missed school days because of truancy, similar to the school principals' restorative justice programs.

Meanwhile, the most effective and successful methods for fighting truancy, according to the district superintendent, involved collaborating with agencies, relying on skilled and trained workers to motivate the students, forging partnerships with the court

system, and having a proactive approach within students' homes. Because the superintendent reported his belief in the effectiveness of such partnerships and collaboration, it was not surprising to see that he also made use of skilled professionals and different agencies to help reduce absenteeism and truancy rates in his district. In addition, similar to one of the strategies in the principals' responses, the superintendent mentioned the need to be proactive in determining issues at an early stage. Schools have started to encourage parents and families to provide guidance at home, so that values and the importance of getting an education are instilled at a young age.

Implications

Based on its findings, the current study can aid schools in determining which program(s) should be used or avoided. By doing so, the study will then improve current truancy and absenteeism programs, allowing schools to maintain and develop effective programs and eliminate ineffective ones. In addition, given the findings that emphasized the impact of cooperation, the study can also strengthen the relationships between schools, families, students, and the agencies involved. Finally, with the overall purpose of improving attendance and preventing absenteeism and truancy, the current study, through its proper use and distribution to schools with a high rate of truancy, will then allow the implementation of effective truancy interventions and an overall reduction in truancy and absenteeism as students realize the value of education.

Limitations

Although the researcher tried to maximize all resources to conduct a complete and extensive study, there were still inadequacies and limitations from the methodology to the analysis of findings. The following were those inadequacies and limitations:

- (1) The number of participants could have limited the results, as there were only four school principal participants and one superintendent. The results of the study could have been more meaningful and in-depth if the sample population was larger. To minimize the effect of the small number of participants, the researcher coded all responses to maximize all interview data. This was performed in order to establish trends that could fully address the research question of the study.
- (2) Complete honesty on the part of the participants was not guaranteed. Given that the participants interviewed were school and district heads, leaders with names, reputations, and institutions to protect, they might have altered their responses, overly emphasizing the success of one program while downplaying the failure of another. The subject on hand is sensitive; the rates of the student absenteeism and truancy may affect the perceptions of the schools and communities. Given that fact, the participants may have limited their answers to protect the image of their schools and students. To minimize that possibility, the researcher constantly reminded the participants of the clauses in the informed consent forms signed before the formal interviews began. In addition, the researcher assured participants that their names would not be mentioned, as they were referred to by code and interview names. The researcher also reminded the participants that she would keep the interview data and transcripts locked inside a vault for five years and would destroy them after that time. This was another measure to further secure the confidentiality of the data collected from the participants.

- (3) Finally, the last limitation is the lack of inclusion of other significant stakeholders as participants in the study such as social workers, students, and their parents. Such groups' perspectives on the most effective truancy programs would have provided other angles and viewpoints of the subject being discussed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings as well as limitations of this study, the researcher was also able to form her own recommendations for future scholars as well as the targeted audience of the current research study. The researcher recommends for the future scholar to consider the following:

- (1) Increasing the total number of participants interviewed in the study, as well as number of stakeholders groups, such as social workers, students, and their parents and families, so that more data can be gathered. By collecting these sets of participants' perceptions, a more in-depth understanding of the subject—one based on the students and parents themselves—could emerge. The students involved with truancy intervention program can then provide the programs that made them go back to school and prevented them from committing truancy again.
- (2) Employing another source of data on truancy issues and intervention programs from the schools. That data could be used to compare and triangulate the findings if the effective programs shared by the principals and superintendent in the interviews were indeed accurate. By doing so, the most effective

programs could be determined and developed as needed, while the ones with the least concrete effect could then be eliminated.

- (3) As for the overall study, it is recommended for the schools with high rates of truancy to read and use the current study as a reference to determine the most effective and useful programs to reduce their truancy problems, such as proactive engagement in students' homes; employment of skilled personnel to watch over and monitor at risk students; cooperation with different agencies; and more.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, the qualitative content analysis of the interviews with the school principals and district superintendent allowed for an investigation of the current programs in place, as well as the most effective methods and strategies based on the experiences and observations of the participants. From the findings, it can be concluded that the school principals and district superintendent had a few different methods they deemed beneficial to reduce truancy in their schools. The principals and superintendent both stated that the most common programs in place were the presence of attendance or truancy officers and cooperation with different agencies. Meanwhile, the most effective and successful methods to combat truancy according to the two groups were a proactive approach within the students' homes; the use of skilled and trained workers to motivate the students; and partnerships with the police and court systems. Lastly, a solid transition plan between middle school and high school was also noted as extremely important. Middle school students often have more hands on with the teachers and support staff and then transition to high school and don't always have a relationship going into the new

school environment. Having students visit the high school before they exit middle school and having a “mentor” staff member who is assigned to them so the student has an adult connection was found to be beneficial. In addition, having welcome activities for the students to participate in and perhaps a student mentoring program are all ways to help bridge the transition between schools and form relationships.

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