A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

by

Robert Lenn Ralston

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. The theory guiding this study was Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, which explains extrinsic and intrinsic motivation sources and their roles in social development through three general constructs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. A screening survey was used to identify 12 elementary teachers from different schools in the southeastern United States who have taught children who were chronically absent. Data were collected through individual interviews, four focus groups, and an emailed open-ended writing prompt. After completing all data collection methods and analyzing each set, the data were synthesized using the core processes described by Moustakas. Four major themes were uncovered: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. These four C's, in alignment with the identified research questions, explained how elementary school teachers addressed and supported students who were chronically absent. Ultimately, the most significant interpretation from this study was a perceived correlation between students who were chronically absent, their home environment, and the need for teachers not only to recognize any hardship the student is facing but also to become the focal point of mitigation on behalf of the child. That is, the greater the adversity a student experiences outside of school to cause their absence, the greater the need for teacher and school intervention and support. Other interpretations of this study involve how technology enhances teacher support and how financial resources are essential for improving support initiatives.

Keywords: phenomenological, gatekeeper, socioeconomic, chronically absent

Copyright Page

Dedication

I want to dedicate this research to schoolteachers, emphasizing the 12 who participated in my study, as well as the more than 7 million chronically absent students each year in our country. I hear you, I care, and I hope others will, too.

I also would like to dedicate this enormous undertaking to my wife, Stacy. Stacy, no one will ever know the hours spent alone, the plans pushed aside, or the vacations missed while I completed years of classes, projects, papers, and now a dissertation. I told you when we met that I was on this path, and you agreed to support me along the way—you kept your promise. It is impossible to completely express my gratitude for your caring and belief in me—you have been there the entire time. I love you, I thank you, and I will work to honor your commitment.

Acknowledgments

As with all endeavors, I thank Jesus for giving me the strength and stamina to complete this exhaustive journey! Once again, in my life, through Christ, all things are possible. "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." – Isaiah 41:10

I also want to thank Dr. Billie Jean Holubz for guiding me through the prospectus process—snapping me into reality and the magnitude of the road that lay before me—and introducing me to my dissertation chair.

Dr. Gail Collins, you have been the most consequential educator I have had the pleasure to know during my 6 years at Liberty, completing my Educational Leadership Specialist degree with high distinction and the Doctorate with high distinction. I was so very blessed to have had you as my dissertation chair. When you decided to add me to your extensive workload, I knew that your standards were high and that you would not accept any deviation or compromise in the professional work needed to complete the manuscript. I also knew that by trusting your vast experience, you would guide me to this day. "If you turn right, I'm turning right. . . . Green ensures I addressed your concerns, and yellow are my comments." I hope I lived up to your expectations. The best compliment to be bestowed on any educator is yours: "Without you, I would not be here today."

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List of Abbreviations

Authoritative Climate Theory (ACT)

Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)

Department of Education (DoE)

English Language Learners (ELLs)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Medical Homebound Instruction (MHI)

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Negative Academic Emotions (NAEs)

New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Positive Academic Emotions (PAEs)

Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

Research Question (RQ)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Transcendental Phenomenological (TPh)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chronic absenteeism is one of the most, if not the most, disadvantageous and impactful problems within the American public education system (Ansari et al., 2020; Balfanz, 2016; Castrechini et al., 2016; Hanno & Gonzalez, 2020; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Simon et al., 2020). Previous research suggested that between 5 and 7.5 million students are chronically absent from public school each year (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). Students who are chronically absent miss critical learning opportunities, and chronic absenteeism is a better predictor of school dropout than low grades or poor standardized test scores (Stempel et al., 2017). Kearney (2008) confirmed what educators experiencing students who are chronically absent in their classrooms must already know: "Youths with excessive absenteeism are at high risk of permanent dropout from school" (p. 258). Whether excused or unexcused absences, expulsion, suspensions, or truancy, students who are chronically absent require significant investment, particularly from their parents, teachers, and community.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Chronic absenteeism within the U.S. public school system is a complex problem with many often-competing variables requiring teachers' personal investment in their students, particularly amongst minorities, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk student populations within the community (Chang & Romero, 2008; DiPaoli et al., 2015). The implication is that without support, these students may eventually drop out of school and are at risk for higher levels of chronic diseases, substance abuse, mental health concerns, and early death (Stempel et al., 2017). This chapter contains the background information on chronic

absenteeism including its historical, social, and theoretical contexts. Following the background for this study, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of this study, and research questions are given. This chapter concludes with a list of pertinent definitions and a summary.

Background

It is the civil right of every child to receive an education within the United States at a standard proficiency level (Adler-Greene, 2019; Evans-Winters et al., 2018; Knight, 2019). Unfortunately, the U.S. public school system fails through various data points (Nation et al., 2020). One concerning phenomenon is the number of students who are chronically absent from school each year. Lim et al. (2019) indicated significant problems with students not attending school despite innovative curricula, classroom technology, legislation, and enormous financial investments. Furthermore, attendance is a leading indicator of a student's learning opportunity and is a crucial metric for measuring whether the government delivers on its promise (Allen et al., 2014). The following sections provide the historical, social, and theoretical background for this critical subject.

Historical Context

School absenteeism is not a new concern. Truancy has been understood as a scourge since the early 19th century. In those times, educational leaders such as Horace Mann promoted laws requiring parents to enroll their children in school to create a more educated and moral electorate (Reyes, 2020). In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to legislate compulsory education (Hunt, 2010). Fuentes (2011) indicated that in 1889, the Chicago Board of Education argued, "We should rightfully have the power to arrest all these little beggars, loafers, and vagabonds that infest our city, take them from the streets and place them in schools where they are compelled to receive an education and learn moral principles" (p. 3). Reyes (2020) indicated

that a quarter of the juveniles jailed at the Chicago House of Correction in 1898 were there for truancy. By 1918, every state had compulsory school attendance laws (Reyes, 2020). Since that era, monitoring attendance, including truancy or average daily attendance, remained the extent of notice by educational and community leaders throughout the 20th century and well past the first decade of the new millennium.

Chronic absenteeism is a relatively new term used to measure student absence. Unlike past terms and measurements such as truancy or average daily attendance, chronic absenteeism denotes missing school more than 15 days a school year for any reason: excused, unexcused, expulsion, suspensions, or truancy (Gottfried, 2019; Lim et al., 2019). However, there is no universally agreed upon threshold. Monitoring students who are chronically absent originated with legislative initiatives under the President Obama era, eventually leading to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Remer, 2017). This federal education law requires disclosing chronic absences in end-of-year district report cards and providing federal funding for training to improve initiatives (Remer, 2017). Since 2015, 36 states and the District of Columbia have shifted to an accountability measure of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality (Marsh, 2019). With the 2015 law as a first step, it was not until 2016 that the U.S. Department of Education issued a report that raised awareness of chronic absenteeism as a severe problem.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education, through the biennial Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) publication, released civil rights data collected from 95,000 schools across the nation. This report revealed that more than 7 million students miss 15 days or more of school each year, their defining criterion of chronic absenteeism (Balfanz, 2016; CRDC, 2016; Gottfried, 2019). These 15 days or more a school year translate to missing over 3 weeks of school; the absent 7 million equates to 16% of the U.S. student population, approximately 1 out

of every 6 students. Moreover, the findings also indicated that 2% of students miss at least 25% of school days in a school year, representing 45 days or more of school a year in total. These statistics reveal vast numbers of young people existing on the margins of learning, school community, and educational opportunity.

Since 2016, states, school districts, and communities have initiated many different approaches to improve student attendance rates, ranging from alternative teaching environments such as project-based learning (PjBL) to heavy-handed penalties for violators and their parents (Conry & Richards, 2018; Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Fowler, 2014). Under the compulsory education laws in Texas, as an example, all children must attend school from the time they are 6 years old or are enrolled in first grade until they turn 19. Truants and some parents who do not make their children go to school could face criminal penalties when not in compliance (Fowler, 2014). It is unclear which initiatives are the correct approach to furthering a student's educational needs. Research is needed to discover how teachers who are responsible for student academic success support students who are chronically absent from school within a historically daunting environment.

Social Context

Chronic absenteeism, amongst other characteristics, is also a social equity issue. Gee (2018) indicated that chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent among minority groups, low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, highly mobile students, and those already involved in the juvenile justice system. Chronic absenteeism, in many cases, reflects family financial status or class rather than a measurement of the student or family apathy towards education. Balfanz (2009) indicated that children in poverty are less likely to graduate from high school and enter college. Although there may be a tendency to attribute a student's lack of

success to any number of perceived stereotypes, low-income students have an uphill battle not socially shared across their communities. Because of this social inequity, poor students face enormous obstacles before they step into a classroom compared to their affluent peers.

McKenzie (2019) indicated that children living in poverty see many chronic stressors. Chronic stressors include unsafe neighborhoods with high levels of crime, parents making minimum wage, which causes financial stress on the family, a disproportionate number of separated or divorced parents, siblings living in different households, and overcrowded homes. Many children raised in poverty come to school without the necessary social–emotional responses needed to develop relationships with their peers and teachers (Gutierrez & Buckley, 2019; Jensen, 2013). In other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges and for whom the school is particularly beneficial are far more likely to be negatively affected by repeatedly missing school. Teachers, therefore, become a critical nexus between providing support within considerable adverse circumstances and student success.

As teachers invest in each student, attempting to identify and bring back students with frequent absences, it is essential that the affected students feel that the school is their refuge, not their holding cell. This proposition is more straightforward said than done. Teachers are already stressed and leaving the profession, with roughly half a million U.S. teachers moving or leaving the teaching profession each year (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). With the amount of investment desired by the individual teacher in supporting chronically absent students in an overly strained environment, teachers appear caught between their classroom students' social and academic needs. However, if not addressed, researchers indicate that students who are chronically absent will not only fail academically but will return to their communities ill-prepared to succeed, creating an endless cycle of low-skilled, uneducated citizens that become demoralized (Chang &

Romero, 2008; DiPaoli et al., 2015).

Theoretical Context

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education, through the biennial CRDC publication, released civil rights data collected from 95,000 schools across the nation. This report revealed that more than 7 million students miss 15 days or more of school a year, their defining criterion of chronic absenteeism; alarm bells began to sound across the country (CRDC, 2016; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). There is existing research advocating ways to improve school attendance, correlations between attendance and achievement, self-efficacy and graduation, and the effectiveness of various programs, policies, and enforcement (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019). One explanation for this phenomenon has been researched through the social bond theory constructs. Through the conceptual framework lens of social bond theory, students who perceive their relationships with the school as either positive or negative directly correlate with academic performance and graduation rates (Radu, 2018). However, lacking from this conceptual framework are the experiences of educators working to build the competence, autonomy, and relatedness for each student to reduce chronic school absenteeism. As such, the appropriate theoretical framework for examining the conveyance between the teacher and the student of basic psychological needs is Ryan and Deci's (1980) self-determination theory (SDT).

This study examined how teachers support students who are chronically absent in elementary school within the U.S. public school system and emphasized the importance of attendance and how being chronically absent from school has potentially long-lasting consequences. Lack of adult support for elementary children who are chronically absent from school puts them at higher risk of lower academic success and ultimately not graduating from

high school (Balfanz, 2016; Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017). Not graduating has a tremendous effect on many aspects of life in America, ranging from poverty and incarceration rates to actual life expectancy (Gottfried, 2019; Lim et al., 2019). As social support is both given and received, this research focused on conveying help from the teacher to the student using Ryan and Deci's (1980) SDT. The SDT guided this research in framing extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation and social development roles at the individual level (Ryan & Deci, 1980). To this end, the SDT provided the framework that discovered how teachers supported chronically absent elementary students. Since there was a need to address chronic absenteeism within the public school system and a knowledge gap on how teachers supported affected students, qualitative research filled that gap and gave voice to the teachers responsible for navigating various policies while being held accountable for their students' academic success.

Problem Statement

The problem is that despite efforts in innovative curriculum, classroom technology, legislation, and enormous financial investments, researchers have found evidence that indicates that significant issues remain regarding students who are chronically absent (Allen et al., 2018; An et al., 2017; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Conry & Richards, 2018). Nationwide, investigators have discovered that between 5 and 7.5 million students are chronically absent from public school each year (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). Many quantitative studies have suggested how chronic absenteeism negatively affects school performance and graduation rates but failed to point to what teachers are doing to address the phenomenon while continuing to be responsible for their students' academic success (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019). School officials face daily responsibility for student achievement when counter influences are outside their immediate control. For example, students who perform

poorly on the district's standardized testing may impact school rewards, budget decisions, promotions, surrounding real estate values, and a host of other choices and entities (Greer, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Remer, 2017).

Regardless of the barrier to attendance, school officials either choose to address this phenomenon or lack the resolve to navigate a seemingly endless cycle of societal circumstances. Although there is existing research advocating ways to improve school attendance (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019), there is a wide gap in knowledge on how teachers support students and associated challenges. In filling that knowledge gap, I conducted transcendental phenomenological research that explored elementary teachers' experiences in addressing and supporting chronically absent students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Students who are chronically absent are generally defined as those missing more than 15 days of scheduled classes in a school year. These absences include excused and unexcused absences, expulsion, suspensions, and truancy (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Conry & Richards, 2018; Lim et al., 2019). The theory guiding this study was SDT, as it explains both extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation and the roles these take on social development through three general constructs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 1980). SDT aligns with how teachers support chronically absent elementary students by elucidating how teacher support enhances a teacher's relationship with a student. Specifically, teachers who help students through any number of investments such as advice, time, love, trust,

or empathy, showing their care and concern for their students, are more likely to motivate and inspire students to succeed and regularly attend school (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Significance of the Study

Nationwide, previous estimates suggested that between 5 and 7.5 million students are chronically absent from public school each year (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). A review of the literature concerning chronic absenteeism revealed many quantitative studies explaining correlations between absenteeism and negative performance and graduation rates but failed to point to what teachers are doing to support affected students while responsible for their academic success (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019). Furthermore, existing researchers advocate potential ways to improve school attendance, but there are no universally settled conclusions (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019). There was a vast knowledge gap on teacher experiences who support affected students.

Schools are often scrutinized when student performance is not at the expected proficiency level (Greer, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Remer, 2017). School and district "report cards" decide rewards, budget decisions, promotions, surrounding real estate values, and other realities and consequences (Greer, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Remer, 2017). Although there is no doubt that policy, educational model, and individual schoolteachers and administrators play an essential part in individual student academic achievement, further investigation may explain low performance differently. While school administrators and teachers contribute, they will not typically demonstrate success if students are not present. Regardless of how professionally managed or prepared a school or individual teacher may be, students must attend to learn (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). School officials are faced with the daily

responsibility for student achievement when counter influences are often outside of their sphere of influence. These may include students with increased illness and injury, nutritional problems, dangerous neighborhoods, family member incarceration, unreliable transportation, bullying, dirty clothing, poor hygiene, obesity, and lack of adult attention (An et al., 2017; Grinshteyn & Tony-Yang, 2017; Lenhoff, & Pogodzinski, 2018; Romanik, 2010; Wang et al., 2017).

Irrespective of the barrier to attendance, school officials must either take on a responsible role within and outside the school walls to support affected students or separate themselves from any responsibility in addressing various impediments. Because the lack of full participation negatively influences students and society, particularly amongst economically depressed communities (Chang & Romero, 2008; Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; DiPaoli et al., 2015), research was needed to determine how teachers are supporting and addressing students who are chronically absent within their schools. This significant study area extended and added to the existing literature, SDT, and provided a practical use for various stakeholders.

Empirical

This study contributed to the existing broad body of literature regarding students who are chronically absent while focused on a new aspect of how teachers support students who are chronically absent while being responsible for their academic success. Although existing researchers advocate ways to improve school attendance, among other studies (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019), there was a wide gap of knowledge on how chronic absenteeism is being addressed through support from a teacher's perspective while recognizing the teacher's responsibility for student academic achievement; this research filled that gap.

Theoretical

This study advanced SDT, explaining through shared experiences the relationship between social and emotional support and how teachers address chronic absenteeism. Self-determination theorists believe that when social support from teachers and parents is established, the level of support becomes a strong predictor of whether an early adolescent's disengagement in the education process will be high or low (Fredricks et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 1980). In other words, the SDT framework helps to explain that the decision of an adolescent to either become chronically absent or drop out of school in the future, rather than completing the education process, is primarily influenced by the amount of social support that a teacher and parent provide as perceived by the student. In pursuing this line of research, gathering teachers' experiences on how they address and support students who are chronically absent while responsible for their academic success further expands the theory. No known studies address this area of research concerning SDT.

Practical

More than one third of all K–12 students live in the southeastern United States, including 56% of all Black students (Robson et al., 2019). Schools that participated in this research benefited from understanding how their community teachers support students who are chronically absent; however, the implication may be further reaching. Arnold et al. (2014) indicated that an area needed for further research is to better understand the needs of students. Additionally, Creghan and Adair-Creghan (2015) indicated, "School districts that desire to meet mandates issued by federal, state, and local governments would be well served to consider the educational needs of minority, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk student populations" (p. 7). In fact, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), states are now held accountable for the

proportion of students who are chronically absent to receive federal funding (De Voto & Reedy, 2021).

Within the SDT constructs, when adults are supportive and interact with children and young adults, these mentally and physically developing young people become inspired by actual or perceived support (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT explains extrinsic and intrinsic motivation sources and their roles in social development through three general constructs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Krane and Klevan (2019) indicated that when parental support is low, help from the teacher becomes even more critical in cultivating positive mental health, autonomy, and success. Often burdened by low income, inflexible work hours, single parenthood, and language barriers, some parents cannot attend school activities or participate in their children's schooling (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017). Nationwide, almost half (46%) of households have both parents working full time (Fernandez et al., 2018). Furthermore, about 15.76 million children live with a single mother in the United States in this decade alone, and about 3.23 million children live with a single father (Manning et al., 2014).

Research Questions

As a researcher, I sought to explore elementary teachers' experiences of supporting chronically absent students while being responsible for their students' academic success. The theory guiding this study was SDT, which is a theoretical approach to human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 1980). Students who are chronically absent may become inspired to regularly attend school through real or perceived support from their teacher and other adults in their lives. Self-determination theorists believe that when social support from teachers and parents is established, the level of support becomes a strong predictor of whether an early adolescent's disengagement in the education process will be high or low (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The research questions for this study were structured to discover the meaning of how elementary school teachers address and support students who were chronically absent. The meaning of a phenomenon, according to Husserl, represents the true nature of a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). I used three research questions to discover how teachers support affected students while being responsible for their academic success. Each research question was aligned with the three constructs of SDT. The three constructs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are necessary for the research problem, gap, purpose, and theory to be aligned.

Research Question One

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the competence of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

This question sought to gather the experiences of the teacher participants. Research indicates a correlation between students who are present and experience positive academic achievement as opposed to those who are chronically absent and experience academic failure, when all other variables are held constant (Caldas, 1993; Roby, 2003). In fact, as Mac Iver and Messel (2012) indicated, "Students who are chronically absent graduate at a rate of 56% while their peers who have satisfactory attendance graduate at 82%" (p. 23). A substantial body of evidence shows that social support from teachers, peers, and guardians contributes to school success (Estell & Perdue, 2013; Havik & Westergård, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Quin, 2017). Within SDT constructs, when adults are supportive and interact with youths, they become inspired by actual or perceived support (Ryan & Deci, 1980). In elementary school, a personalized, competency-based classroom may involve teachers moving between groups of learners, facilitating discussions, helping students explore and set goals, or engaging in more direct instruction with a few students at a time (Camacho & Legare, 2016). Teacher support may

offer flexible seating and students participating in decisions about how and where they learn, working independently or grouped. Addressing the competence construct helped explain how teacher support assists the student in building their determination to control the outcome of their life (Ryan & Deci, 1980).

Research Question Two

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the autonomy of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

Within the constructs of SDT, students need different kinds of support to engage in their studies successfully (Camara et al., 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001; Väisänen et al., 2017). Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that the autonomy construct attempts to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life but not to the exclusion of having others involved. This construct reinforces the idea that situations that give autonomy instead of taking it away positively affect personal growth and development. Autonomy-supportive classrooms are where students see their perspectives valued, have opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings, and are encouraged to make choices and participate in self-initiative learning activities (Skinner et al., 2009; Sobkowiak, 2016).

Research Question Three

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing needs of relatedness of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

Relatedness explains the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers' relatedness has been positively linked to a range of motivational outcomes, such as students' goal pursuit, effort, persistence, self-regulatory strategies, and beliefs about competence and control (King et al., 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Relatedness is considered a basic human need in many theories (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Lavigne et al. (2011) further conceptualized the need for relatedness to include acceptance and intimacy. Students feel accepted or belong when socially supported, respected, and included in a given context. Furthermore, they experience a sense of familiarity when they feel close to or cared for by others (Kim et al., 2018). With this research question, I intended to identify how teachers identify, prevent, or take proactive measures to address any obstacles that hinder students from feeling accepted, belonging, included, and respected.

Definitions

1. *Autonomy* – Theoretical construct of SDT seeking to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life but not to the exclusion of having others involved (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
2. *Chronically Absent* – Students that miss more than 15 days in a typical year. Additionally, chronic absenteeism includes excused and unexcused absences, expulsion, suspensions, and truancy (Gottfried, 2019).
3. *Competence* – Theoretical construct of SDT seeking to control the outcome and experience in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
4. *Gatekeepers* – The role of gatekeepers in qualitative research is to assist in gaining access to archival sites and determines why the site was selected for the study. Creswell (2019) described gatekeepers as people "at the site who provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done" (p. 292).
5. *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* – A qualitative research methodology concerned with bringing an objective perspective to the body of existing research. IPA has become a dominant qualitative research methodology in many academic disciplines (Tuffour, 2017).

6. *Relatedness* – Theoretical construct of SDT seeking to explain the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
7. *Voice* – The phenomenological requirement to understand and "give voice" to participants' concerns and the interpretative provision to contextualize and make sense of these claims and concerns from a psychological perspective (Larkin et al., 2006).

Summary

Chapter One of this study introduced my research. An overview of the literature and background revealed that chronic absenteeism is one of the most, if not the most, disadvantageous and impactful problems within the American public education system. I discussed the problem that despite efforts in innovative curriculum, classroom technology, legislation, and enormous financial investment, significant issues remain surrounding students being chronically absent; I also provided a historical, social, and theoretical reason why I investigated this topic. I revealed that the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Further, I explained why the significance of this study addressed the wide gap of knowledge on how chronic absenteeism is being addressed through support from a teacher's perspective while recognizing the teacher's responsibility for student academic achievement. Finally, I identified three research questions that guided the research and explained why each question needed further investigation.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to explore the federal government's historical expansion in educational policy, risks and implications of chronically absent students, what influences a student's perceptions of attendance, and individual community and other efforts designed to address chronic absenteeism within the public school system. In the first section of this chapter, the theoretical framework provides the reader with the guiding self-determination theory. Additionally, this first section of Chapter Two will detail how self-determination theory is relevant to teachers supporting students who are chronically absent by using the constructs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000); afterward, a brief reference to the this study's importance is provided. Following the theoretical framework, the related literature synthesizes recent literature, noting the federal government as a central consideration for chronic absenteeism policy. Further information is provided on outside-of-school barriers that impede students from attending and how absenteeism affects eventual graduation rates and the community and students within long-term measurements. Afterward, various influences affecting attendance and how the teacher and school play critical roles in student attendance early in the educational journey are introduced. Finally, this review discusses multiple national efforts to address the phenomenon and local methods currently in practice. This chapter will conclude with a summary.

Theoretical Framework

The goal of this study was to discover how teachers support students who are chronically absent in elementary school within the U.S. public school system and emphasize the importance of attendance and how being chronically absent from school has potentially long-lasting

consequences. Lack of adult support for elementary children who are chronically absent from school, and therefore at higher risk of lower academic success and ultimately not graduating, has a tremendous effect on many aspects of life in America, ranging from poverty and incarceration rates to actual life expectancy (Gottfried, 2019; Lim et al., 2019). The guiding theory of this research study was the self-determination theory (SDT).

Social support is both given and received. The distinction between these two directions in which social support occurs is clear and vital. Although most research focuses on the receipt of social support, only a few studies examine the conveyance of support. Breaking from traditional research that concentrates mainly on receiving support, this research focused on the conveyance of help from the teacher to the student. Therefore, I used SDT as a guide to discover how teachers support chronically absent elementary students. Such a topic requires a theoretical framework appropriate for examining the conveyance of basic psychological needs between the teacher and the student. These basic needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness, the skills every learner needs to actively and positively learn (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). These three basic psychological needs are found within SDT. The SDT view suggests that teacher support occurs when students perceive cognitive (Skinner et al., 2008), emotional (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), or autonomy-oriented support from a teacher during the students' learning process (Wellborn & Connell, 1987). SDT represents a broad framework of study that attempts to frame both extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation and social development roles at the individual level. This representation is met through three general constructs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, all of which apply to how teachers support chronically absent elementary students (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

History of SDT

The development of SDT occurred in the 1970s through research conducted by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (Jungert et al., 2016). Jungert et al. (2016) indicated that SDT evolved from previous studies that compared intrinsic and extrinsic motives within human behavior. Ryan and Deci did not formally introduce this theory until 1980. Before that, concepts related to SDT appeared in various writings. In general, considerable research suggested that greater perceived control over one's outcomes tends to be associated with a variety of positive effects (Ryan & Deci, 1980). Previous cognitive theorists such as Tolman in 1932, Maslow in 1943, Lewin in 1951, Glass and Singer in 1972, and Loevinger in 1976 set the stage for the study of self-determination. In introducing the concepts of behavioral decision making and controls over outcomes, these previous theorists and their associated theories allowed Ryan and Deci (1980) to point out that only some intended behaviors are self-determined. Ryan and Deci (1980) emphasized that self-determination can be either supported or hindered by environmental forces and relationships. This work has increased considerably and is frequently used in psychological and educational research. Although other theories have attempted to explain the relationship between teacher and students, such as the social support theory, no known studies address this study's research topic. The social support theory is a criminal justice-focused theory that proposes that providing instrumental, informational, and emotional support to students reduces the likelihood of delinquency and crime (Drennon-Gala, 1995).

Research Relationship with Theory

SDT aligns with how teachers address and support chronically absent elementary students by elucidating how past researchers have defined and explained three dimensions of teacher support. These three dimensions are described in related literature on teacher support,

including support of autonomy, structure, and involvement (Skinner et al., 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wellborn & Connell, 1987). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), these three psychological support needs occur within the SDT framework. Support for autonomy is teacher provision of choice, relevance, or respect to students. The term structure is defined as clarity of expectations and contingencies. Involvement is warmth, affection, the dedication of resources, understanding of the student, or dependability (Skinner et al., 2008). Research applying this definition of teacher support has found that support positively influences anxiety, depression, hope, and other emotions among students (Reddy, 2003; Skinner et al., 2008; Van Ryzin et al., 2009). Ryan and Deci (2000) incorporated these ideas and explained that individuals do work and complete tasks based on their values, interests, and hobbies but acknowledged that others close to them influence their related motivations and inspirations.

Motivations and inspiration are how humans move or others act; SDT approaches human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Concerning teacher support to chronically absent elementary students, students become inspired through real or perceived support from their teacher and other adults in their lives. In other instances, students are encouraged by additional external factors such as rewards, fear, opinions of others, and any number of different means (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition to these factors, many intrinsic features motivate students as well. These include curiosity, values, and interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The application of SDT advances and extends the theory while assisting researchers in explaining that students who feel supported and are involved in setting their own educational goals are more likely to reach them.

SDT Constructs

The three broad constructs within SDT are labeled competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007). Concerning teacher support and student

attendance, the competence construct seeks to control the outcome and experience in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This construct explains that giving students positive feedback on a task increases their intrinsic motivation to do it. By recognizing competence's role in our lives, we can understand why people typically enjoy accolades. Conversely, not receiving positive feedback decreases both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that the autonomy construct attempts to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life but not to the exclusion of having others involved. This construct reinforces the idea that situations that give autonomy instead of taking it away positively affect personal growth and development. Finally, relatedness explains the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When this occurs, optimal development follows. Ideal growth and developmental maturity are inherently desired in humans, but they do not materialize automatically. To obtain total intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, they need nurturing from their social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Elementary students' motivation to attend, do well, and pursue academic achievement may emerge if they feel that they are involved and supported by teachers and other adults in their lives. As explained within the constructs of SDT, a person's competence, autonomy, and relatedness account for extrinsic and intrinsic motivation sources and the roles these constructs play as either helpful or detrimental to a person's wellness in a particular setting (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Based on the foundational belief supported by Ryan and Deci's 1980 SDT, the following literature review focuses on how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent in elementary school and emphasizes the importance of attendance and how being chronically absent from school has potentially long-lasting consequences. Teacher support

enhances a teacher's relationship with a student. Specifically, teachers who support students through any number of investments such as advice, time, love, trust, or empathy by showing their care and concern for their students are more likely to motivate and inspire students to attend school regularly and succeed (Gutierrez & Buckley, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Reeve and Cheon (2021) indicated that the opposite might occur when students do not feel that they are supported. With teachers' experiences supporting chronically absent elementary students now identified and explained through this research study, community and educational leaders have more information to tailor policy and initiatives to decrease chronic absenteeism within the public school system. A better understanding of the significance of teacher support, guided by SDT and its effect on chronic absenteeism may drive up attendance and, ultimately, graduation rates.

Related Literature

The purpose of this section of Chapter Two is to provide a thorough presentation of the existing literature related to how teachers support students, specifically elementary school students, who are chronically absent from school. Although much research surrounds other educational concerns, the reviewed literature revealed a lack of shared experiences on how teachers convey support to chronically absent students. Additionally, the literature also revealed that when classroom teachers and the collective faculty and administration target the specific learning needs of students and seek to help them through investments inside and outside their classrooms, the students can demonstrate potential success. At the macro level of effort, the federal government has played a central role in creating policy and financially supporting various programs for decades. However, through the SDT theoretical lens, this literature review examined not only macro exertions but specific efforts and implications of the phenomenon,

aspects of how teachers convey support to their students, and how community, teaching techniques, and teacher–parent partnerships provide opportunities for supporting students. The information exposed the current gap in knowledge and established the need for this research study.

The Federal Government's Macro Role in Public Educational Policy

Chronic absenteeism is one of the most, if not the most, disadvantageous and impactful problems within the American public education system (Ansari et al., 2020; Balfanz, 2016; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Castrechini et al., 2016; Chang & Romero, 2008). It is without question that this vitally important phenomenon needs further research for various reasons. The consequences of being chronically absent from school, particularly during elementary school, range from being less likely to vote as an adult to more significant lifelong economic difficulties, including early death (Ansari et al., 2020; Krueger et al., 2015). In the simplest observation, if a student is not present for school, the student cannot achieve academically (Gottfried, 2017; Keegan & Gable, 2015). Understanding the impact of low school attendance amongst the student population requires educators to reach much further than simple conclusions. As such, chronic absenteeism has become a critical concern when crafting public policy.

School districts, administrators, and often individual teachers are the target of scrutiny when student performance is not at the expected level of proficiency (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Standardized test scores decide rewards, budget decisions, promotions, surrounding school real estate values, and other implications and entities (Greer, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Remer, 2017). Although there is no doubt that policy, educational model, and individual school professionals play an essential part in individual student's academic achievement, further investigation may explain low performance differently. While school

administrators and teachers contribute, the student will not demonstrate success if the student is not present. Regardless of how professionally managed or prepared a school or individual teacher may be, students must attend to learn and improve (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). In many instances, the factors contributing to students who are chronically absent are outside of a school's control.

Communities often look to their elected government officials to provide ways to improve the quality of life for those they serve. Continuants expect their elected officials to solve complex problems through various initiatives and means. Chronic absenteeism is one of many focuses that has garnered public interest and initiative in addressing. To fully understand how teachers support chronically absent elementary students, explaining the federal government's historical macro role in the public school system is required to establish the relationship between the pressures teachers are under and how that might affect support effort policy and practice.

Federal Government as a Central Consideration

The federal government has been involved in public education from the beginning. However, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that the U.S. government began to play a central role in shaping the American education system (Black, 2017). At first, government involvement was small and innocuous. Still, the federal government has leveraged its monetary influence to pursue states to conform to national political objectives over the past several decades.

Beginning with President Lyndon Johnson as part of his Great Society strategy, the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Assistance Act (1965), which among other things, funneled billions of dollars of federal funding to public schools across the country. Between 1966 and 2006, approximately 315.1 billion dollars were spent on K–12

public schools, accounting for nearly 10% of the expenditure of local school districts' budgets (Black, 2017). Continuing through the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter greatly expanded federal oversight into local education by creating the Department of Education (DoE; Black, 2017; Greer, 2018). President George H. W. Bush gave a significant policy and monetary boost in 1992 when his America 2000 plan included nationwide, uniform academic standards and testing, which would later be incorporated into Common Core (Greer, 2018; Powell et al., 2008; Ravitch, 1996). Later, President Clinton's administration created the National Education Standards and Improvement Council, which recommended voluntary state and federal standards and promised money to the states for compliance with those standards (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Greer, 2018). At the turn of the century, in 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Greer (2018) indicated it was the most significant expansion of federal oversight into education up until that time.

> The first and perhaps most controversial difference was that NCLB mandated that 100% of students be proficient, or at grade level, on state standards by 2014. State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) were to make incremental but steady annual progress toward this goal through the law's annual year performance (AYP) provisions. This facilitated an essential shift from grade-span to annual testing. (p. 108)

The NCLB Act remained the law until the President Obama administration, when the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) replaced it. For the first time, every public school in America was required to disclose chronic absenteeism rates in their end-of-year district report cards to receive federal funding for training and initiatives that target students who are chronically absent (Black; Greer, 2018). Since 2015, 36 states and the District of Columbia have

shifted to an accountability measure of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality (Marsh, 2019).

Chronic Absenteeism as a Federal Measurement

The term chronic absenteeism was first introduced in 2010 by Hedy Chang, a member of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Attendance Works initiative, to bring national attention to, at that time, a largely invisible but educationally critical issue (Coons, et al., 2018). This term was purposed to differentiate it from past daily attendance and truancy definitions and account for all absences, including excused and unexcused. As defined, and with initial funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Attendance Works was born as a national initiative.

Attendance Works, a leading national organization providing tools and resources for schools to reduce chronic absenteeism, was the first national initiative to specifically research whether missing too much school in the early grades was one reason few low-income children were reading proficiently by the end of third grade (Allen et al., 2014). This research, which led to the publication *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* found that students who are chronically absent do worse academically. It also revealed that 1 in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students nationwide miss nearly a month of school each year (Chang & Romero, 2008). In some cities, the rate is as high as 1 in 4 elementary students and may affect up to 50% of all students (Allen et al., 2014; Bruner et al., 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008). Moreover, children living in poverty were four times more likely to be chronically absent than their more affluent peers, and the impact on their learning was even more significant (Allen et al., 2014; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). This initial outside government national initiative, which occurred during the President Obama administration era, established momentum for the federal government to get further

involved in chronic absenteeism through the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) passage a few years later.

In 2016, the U.S. DoE, through the biennial CRDC publication, released civil rights data collected from 95,000 schools across the nation. This report revealed that more than 7 million students miss 15 days or more of school each year, their defining criterion of chronic absenteeism (CRDC, 2016; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). These 15 days or more a school year translate to missing over 3 weeks of school; the absent 7 million equates to 16% of the U.S. student population, approximately 1 out of every 6 students. Moreover, the findings also indicated that 2% of students miss at least 25% of school days in a school year, representing 45 days or more of school a year in total. These statistics reveal vast numbers of young people existing on the margins of learning, school community, and educational opportunity. Since that report and the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), the U.S. DoE, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in collaboration with the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Department of Justice launched Every Student, Everyday Conference: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism program (Adelman et al., 2016; Adler-Greene, 2019; Black, 2017). This conference, which reported its findings to President Obama, was meant to orchestrate and coordinate community action that directly addresses the underlying causes of local chronic absenteeism (Evans-Winters et al., 2018; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Knight, 2019).

The federally controlled conference involved a diverse coalition of stakeholders working together to engage and support students who are chronically absent. A byproduct of this initiative is the “Community Toolkit.” The toolkit offers information, suggested action steps, and a list of existing tools and resources, including evidence-based resources, for individuals, educational

leaders, and school systems to begin or enhance the work of effective, coordinated community action that addresses chronic absenteeism (Adelman et al., 2016). In addition to these federal macro initiatives to assist communities, mentorship programs were established under the national My Brother's Keeper program to target the highest risk students connecting over a million students with mentors across 10 chronically absent communities. Those communities in the program included Austin, Boston, Columbus, Denver, Miami-Dade, New York City, Philadelphia, Providence, San Antonio, and Seattle (Adelman et al., 2016). All this effort is in close cooperation with state and local municipalities with the hope of keeping youth in school. Unfortunately, the chronic absenteeism rates across the nation remain astoundingly high, with nearly 1 in 5 American young people not graduating on time, if ever (DiPaoli et al., 2015).

The heavy reliance from communities on federal programs and monetary support through measurements and the statistically failed attendance and academic performance rates regardless of past national government initiatives throughout the public school system at the macro level have brought a rise in demand for school choice initiatives. As with many federal programs, large budgets do not necessarily lead to desired results.

Risk and Implications for Students Who Are Chronically Absent

It is the civil right of every child to receive an education within the United States at a standard proficiency level (Adler-Greene, 2019; Evans-Winters et al., 2018; Knight, 2019). Unfortunately, the U.S. public school system is failing. Lim et al. (2019) provided evidence that despite efforts in innovative curriculum, classroom technology, legislation, and enormous financial investments, significant problems remain around students not attending school. Grinshteyn and Tony-Yang (2017) showed that students not attending are not limited to those who skip middle and high school despite public perception. They also include students with

unreliable transportation issues, parents with addictions, those who are home caring for family members, sick themselves, or any other contributing factors. Other aspects may include students with long-term illness and injury, nutritional problems, dangerous neighborhoods, family member incarceration, being bullied, limited or dirty clothing, poor hygiene, obesity, or experiencing a lack of adult attention (An et al., 2017; Grinshteyn & Tony-Yang, 2017; Lenhoff, & Pogodzinski, 2018; Romanik, 2010; Wang et al., 2017). Children with asthma, as one example, are one of the leading causes of school absenteeism according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which also estimates that asthma caused nearly 14 million missed school days in 2013 alone (Hsu et al., 2016).

Nationwide, previous estimates suggest that between 5 and 7.5 million students are chronically absent from school each year (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). Furthermore, students who are chronically absent graduate at a rate of 56%, while their peers that regularly attend school graduate at a rate of 82% (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). The lack of full participation negatively influences students and society, particularly in economically depressed communities (Chang & Romero, 2008; DiPaoli et al., 2015). That is, negative school achievement disproportionately affects low-income communities where failed public policy extraordinarily resides (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Balfanz (2009) indicated that students in poverty are less likely to graduate from high school and enter college. The irony of the phenomenon across all aspects is that the students who need the most significant assistance offered through education are most likely to be chronically absent and, therefore, least likely to benefit.

Chronic absenteeism occurs in every grade level, but research suggests that students in the early elementary grades experience high rates of chronic absenteeism (Bartanen, 2020; Buyse et al., 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008; Robinson et al., 2018). During the 2013–2014 school year,

nearly 1 in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students were chronically absent (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Additionally, at least 10% of kindergarten and first-grade students miss a month or more of the school year, with low family income students at four times greater risk of this phenomenon than their middle-class peers (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Romero & Lee, 2008). Ansari et al. (2020) found, as an example, that those who were more regularly absent in the early years of school were less likely to vote, reported having more significant economic difficulties, and had poorer educational outcomes by the time they reached 22 to 23 years old. The early emergence of chronic absenteeism by the youngest students is especially concerning because kindergarten and elementary school attendance strongly predict student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2018). This prediction holds for students who initially arrived at kindergarten academically ready to learn but then became chronically absent at any point before middle school. Across the research, students who are chronically absent score well below their peers on third-grade reading and math tests at every elementary grade level (Dubay & Holla, 2016; Hernandez, 2011). Moreover, regular daily attendance appears to be even more critical for at-risk students, such as English language learners (ELLs) and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged households who are statistically already in danger of falling behind academically (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Despite the well-documented association between kindergarten and elementary school attendance and positive student outcomes, parents of elementary school students do not necessarily correlate the importance of attendance and academic success (Ehrlich et al., 2015).

Chronic absenteeism within the U.S. public school system is a complex problem with many often-competing variables requiring teachers' personal investment with their students, particularly amongst minorities, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk student populations within the community (Allen et al., 2014; Chang & Romero, 2008; DiPaoli et al., 2015).

Sometimes the conditions that lead to absenteeism have more to do with family circumstances than student motivation. This information is valuable and vital for school officials and teachers when deciding on the necessary support for an individual child. Students spend an average of 7751 hours with their teachers during their primary and lower secondary education (Hogekamp et al., 2016). Hogekamp et al. (2016) indicated that teachers help students consistently acquire academic knowledge and skills during this extensive time and prepare students for later functioning in society by teaching students to navigate the social world successfully, both in and outside of school. Previous studies have already demonstrated that teachers' emotional support is crucial for students' social functioning and academic engagement (Farmer et al., 2011). Unfortunately, these studies did not examine support conveyance between the teacher and the student of basic psychological needs. These basic needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness, the skills needed by every learner to actively and positively learn (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Before capturing how teachers convey support to students who are chronically absent, educational leaders and teachers must first recognize the barriers to attendance that often originate outside of the school, their influence, and how chronic student absenteeism affects the individual and community if not addressed.

Outside-of-School Barriers Impeding Attendance

School officials and teachers do not control many external factors that affect student attendance. However, they have still endeavored to remove obstacles impeding attendance, such as helping a student who has moved obtain a bus pass, adjusting a course schedule for a student whose parents work an early morning shift, or activating social services to provide temporary relief for homelessness (Canfield et al., 2016). Additionally, Canfield et al. (2016) indicated that

educators must recognize that external factors are not the only deterrents to attendance. A teacher's role in addressing the conditions for learning is squarely in their control.

Schoolteachers have a crucial role in identifying students' barriers and helping them connect with the resources they need. Chronic absenteeism is driven by overlapping medical, individual, family, and social factors, including chronic illness, mental health conditions, bullying, perceived lack of safety, health problems or needs of other family members, inconsistent parenting, poor school climate, economic disadvantage, and unreliable transportation (Allen et al., 2018). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) indicated that students are absent amongst three broad categories of barriers, two that are generally outside the sphere of school and teacher influence. These barriers consist of those not attending school due to general life circumstances and the student's family composition. Prevailing life circumstances may include a student's family responsibilities, housing instability, and poverty, whereas the family composition may consist of size, mix-marital siblings, and single parents or guardians. The third barrier within the school and teacher's sphere of influence surrounds the idea that students are absent to avoid harmful school atmospheres, bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment, and peer-targeted embarrassment (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Chronic absenteeism is not a one-size-fits-all problem. Addressing the obstacles facing students who are chronically absent requires teacher support and commitment to level the students' challenges.

General Life Circumstances. Elementary school students are not unlike any school-age student in that regular school attendance may become disrupted by uncontrollable life circumstances. However, there is a difference in capability because elementary school students exclusively and typically rely on the adults in their life to make decisions for them and fully assist them in their educational endeavors. Life circumstances may include food insecurity or

hunger, parental substance abuse, unstable housing arrangements, unreliable transportation, job loss within the family, and lack of health insurance, all contributing to chronic absenteeism (Allen et al., 2018). As one example, despite substantial progress in health insurance coverage for children, more than 15% of all U.S. children under 17 remain uninsured and have a more limited ability to access health care and treatment. This lack of medical access remains a crucial life circumstance for chronically absent elementary school students, as an illness is the most reported reason for absences (Kerr et al., 2012).

The early grades are a critical period of engagement with the educational process, and full attention is associated with academic and social success (Duncan et al., 2008). Risk factors and situations that lead to chronic absenteeism weaken a child's engagement in education. The presence of multiple risk factors significantly increases the risk of absences. Even excused absences, such as illnesses, may cause the child to fall behind academically and lose connections with peers and supportive school personnel (Allen et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2008; Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). Students who miss more than 2 days during the first month of school are likely to miss up to a month during the year (Balfanz, 2016). One study conducted by the Mississippi Department of Education (2018) discovered that students who missed fewer than 2 days at the beginning of the school year in September had a 7% absence rate for the year. Others who missed 2–4 days had a 38.8% absence rate, and those with more than 4 days had a staggering 77.1% absence rate. Missing a few days a year for illness or travel is inevitable; however, educational leaders and teachers must endeavor to recognize at-risk students early on in the year as these students are likely to need greater individualized support.

The Student's Family. Across the literature, each study revealed various themes, but all point to the family or adult influences on attendance and performance or some association within

the student's life. Young children depend upon their primary caregivers to ensure they arrive at school every day. Allen et al. (2018) indicated that student illness is the most commonly reported reason for absences, but frequently absent children often do not have a chronic disease and may not even be ill. They stated that more than 40% of those reporting an absence due to illness or injury were home for other reasons, such as parental apathy, transportation problems, family activities, or parental and sibling illness. Students from low-income families may be particularly likely to have parents who undervalue daily attendance (Robinson et al., 2018). Poverty and the lack of stable, affordable housing are associated with mobility and other barriers that include the lack of reliable transportation, nutritious food, and limited access to health care, all of which are beyond the elementary student's control. Chang and Romero (2008) indicated, "Sometimes, parents are simply too exhausted to wake up in the morning in time to get their children dressed, fed and to school because they are working night shifts and even multiple jobs to pay bills" (p. 12). Also, compared with more affluent parents, low-income parents tend to feel excluded from a school system that may not necessarily reflect or acknowledge their beliefs, socioeconomic challenges, or cultural backgrounds (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Robinson et al. (2018) indicated that when parents harbor feelings of distrust toward school, they may be even more susceptible to questioning the value of schooling altogether.

In the past two decades, an extensive body of research has established the detrimental impact of poverty and economic hardship on children's development and well-being (Avery et al., 2020; Capotosto, 2020; Neppl et al., 2016; Park & Holloway, 2018). Ironically, these affected students are most benefitted by education to eventually change their circumstances. Romero and Lee (2008) learned through their research that exposure to poverty and other risks arising from the sociodemographic characteristics of parents and families negatively impacts

children's cognitive development, socioemotional functioning, and school attendance and performance. The patterns of intra-family interaction, communication, and poor quality of the environment in the home, the neighborhood, and the broader community are all considerations (Romero & Lee, 2008). A family's race is also a leading indicator of potential risk. Although some of the highest chronic absenteeism rates occur in urban, heavily non-White schools, high rates also occur in rural, predominantly White districts (Bruner et al., 2011; Dubay & Holla, 2016). Additionally, English-speaking families with student-aged learners are somewhat less likely to be chronically absent than their primarily non-English-speaking peers (Marsh, 2019). Native American and Pacific Islander students are 65% more likely than White students to miss 3 or more weeks of school, Black students are 36% more likely, and Hispanic students are 11% more likely (Blad, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Marsh, 2019). Fully accounting for the various at-risk demographics in a school and district will assist in structuring policy and practices that bring maximum support to students who are chronically absent (Holme et al., 2014).

An elementary student's family is the first line of defense to improve the student's overall attendance and academic performance. In fact, the best predictor of student success may be the extent to which families encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their child's education (Soutullo et al., 2019). The lack of family involvement often directly accounts for students who are chronically absent. When students were asked about their experiences, they corroborated this assertion. Keegan and Gable (2015) offered standardized questions to ninth-grade student participants, asking them directly why they miss school; the answers were telling and were somewhat in line with elementary student concerns. In priority, the reasons provided were as follows:

- The lack of parental insistence that they attend.
- Their perception of teacher concern for them as individuals or their attendance.
- Personal boredom.
- Lack of transportation or way to get to school.
- Social media.

Regarding social media, students reported that they had not slept because they had been utilizing social media; the students were too tired in the morning to get to school, which clearly indicated a flaw in parental concern (Keegan & Gable, 2015). Students with satisfactory attendance in the ninth grade are four times more likely to enroll in college than their ninth-grade peers who are chronically absent (Ehrlich et al., 2015).

Finally, the student's family size and composition are also considerations. Lim et al. (2019) indicated through their research that children from smaller family sizes, specifically single-parent homes, are more likely to be absent and perform with difficulty. In fact, one research study indicated that without knowing anything about the school or district a particular student attends, knowing the number of parents at home, the level of parents' education, and the poverty rate predict a student's math score on standardized testing with 90% certainty (Evans, 2005). For 2019, the last year data were collected, the Annie E. Casey Foundation indicated that 24% of White, 42% of Hispanic, 52% of American Indian, and an astounding 67% of Black families are single parent composition (Hernandez, 2011).

Teachers experience challenges both in and outside of school in addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent. Inside the school, teachers must help students maintain continuity with other students when some are missing, help absent students catch up on course material missed during the absence, and maintain an environment that promotes social

and emotional growth (Gottfried, 2017). Outside the school, many contributing factors appear difficult or impossible to influence by educators alone. School and teacher performance does not fully and accurately predict student attendance and achievement; however, the family may.

Chronic Absenteeism Effects on Graduation Rates

Graduating from high school does not guarantee individual success or community prosperity. However, research has indicated that dropping out of high school has adverse consequences, including negative effects on employment, lifetime earnings, and physical health (Lee, 2020). If standardized education is meant to provide each student with the minimum necessary standard education to navigate the society that awaits, then a logical correlation becomes apparent that every individual needs to graduate or suffer a life of impediments.

Research indicates a strong relationship between student attendance, graduation, and dropout rates (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019). DiPaoli et al. (2015) found that students who are chronically absent for 4 years between eighth and 12th grade drop out at a rate of 60%. A student who is chronically absent any year between the eighth and 12th grade is seven and a half times more likely to drop out (DiPaoli et al., 2015). During a child's elementary school years, poor attendance rates could impact their performance later in school and life. Coelho et al. (2015) found the following:

> Throughout the early elementary years, students gain the social and academic skills essential to their educational achievement. The learning and attainment of these skills occur during a critical development period of a child's life. Disturbances or delays in a child's education in the early years can ripple across their progress as they attempt to build new knowledge and skills upon more basic iterations and ultimately alter their life course trajectories on several measures of well-being. (p. 8)

Moreover, other research shows that chronic absence is a leading warning sign that a student will drop out (Castrechini et al., 2016). Castrechini et al. (2016) indicated that a study from the National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES) noted differences in absentee rates, and projections for graduation were observed as early as kindergarten. Those students who eventually dropped out of high school had missed significantly more school days in first grade than their peers who later graduated from high school. Kearney (2008) indicated that without any doubt, the literature showed that students who are chronically absent "with excessive absenteeism are at high risk for permanent dropout from school" (p. 258).

Chronic Absenteeism Affects the Community and Individual Student

Chronic absenteeism leads not only to academic failure for the individual but negatively affects American society, creating an endless cycle of low skilled, uneducated citizens that become demoralized within their community, hindering individual, community, and national success (Balfanz et al., 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008). Understanding the correlation between chronic absenteeism and high school dropout rates provides the nexus to the eventual effects on communities. In one example, according to a study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, increasing the male high school completion rate by just 5% would save the nation $4.9 billion in crime-related expenses. Likewise, if all students graduated, incomes would increase, and reliance on a program like Medicare would be reduced enough to save each generation $17 billion. Not finishing high school does not just impact the student who dropped out; it also impacts public financial resources. In another example, according to Graduation Alliance, a non-profit organization designed to provide educators, government agencies, and community leaders with versatile pathways to high school graduation for youth and adults, half of Americans on public assistance are dropouts, and each dropout cost taxpayers $292,000 through the course of their

lives (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021). Single motherhood is another area of concern and is both a cause and a consequence of not finishing high school. Among women aged 16 to 24, high school dropouts were the group most likely to be single mothers, with 22.6% of this group being single mothers (Rahimi & Liston, 2018). Additionally, dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated in prison. According to a Center for Labor Market Studies research report, high school dropouts are more than 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than 4-year college graduates and more than six times more likely to be incarcerated than those with only a high school diploma (Snyder et al., 2017). To further emphasize this point to the furthest extreme, research also indicated that mortality rates are greater amongst those without a high school degree than those who complete high school (Krueger et al., 2015). In fact, as Krueger et al. (2015) indicated, "Mortality attributable to low education [not finishing high school] is comparable in magnitude to mortality attributable to individuals being current rather than former smokers. Existing research suggests that a substantial part of the association between education [not finishing high school] and mortality is causal" (p. 9).

Supporting students within the public school system is imperative to further the interests of both the student and the community as a whole. The relationship between chronic absenteeism and failed academic achievement and the implications surrounding students dropping out of high school is staggering. Chronic absenteeism is a meaningful and relevant research topic. However, despite the perception that chronic absenteeism is mainly those who skip school and is primarily a high school problem, the literature proves otherwise. To understand chronic absenteeism, researchers must begin at the beginning of a student's formal education. Chronic absenteeism consequences start early and carry forward through high school.

Influences and Teacher's Support of Elementary School Students

Elementary school students are in the greatest need of support. For example, elementary school students make very few personal decisions in their daily routine. At the same time, their parents or guardians have an enormous influence that affects attendance, including transportation to and from school, communication with the central office, and planning vacations, amongst others (Robinson et al., 2018). Elementary school parents typically decide whether or not children miss school, and by age 8, many students are actively negotiating with their parents to not attend during the school week (Sheppard, 2005). Often absences happen because the student or parents do not understand how much attendance matters or the student has a sibling out of school for the day. Other reasons include the school lacking a solid culture of attendance or the student wanting to do something else (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Balfanz et al. (2007) also suggested that if this pattern continues, by sixth grade, chronic absences become an early warning sign that a student may drop out of high school. Moreover, by ninth grade, absenteeism rates are a better indicator than eighth-grade test scores that a student will drop out before the 12th grade (Ready, 2010).

Parents differ in their beliefs regarding their role in their child's education (Hammer et al., 2007). It follows that those parents who underestimate the rigor and learning occurring in elementary school classrooms may be less motivated to exert additional effort to help their child attend school more often (Robinson et al., 2018). From interviews and surveys of a diverse mix of low-income parents, Allison et al. (2017) from the Ad Council in California found that parents want the best for their children, including success in school and college education. Remarkably, these same parents did not correlate attendance and achievement, especially in early grades. The parents surveyed were twice as likely to worry about the effect of absences in high school

compared to those in the early grades (Allison et al., 2017). Moreover, parents often do not know how many days their children miss. Although all the parents involved in the survey had children missing 10 or more days a school year, only 30% said their children missed that much school (Allison et al., 2017). At the same time, the Ad Council in California demonstrated that 60% said their children missed 2 days a month, adding up to about 18 days a year, which is considered chronically absent (Allison et al., 2017). While a full 72% of parents indicated that teachers are the most trusted messengers for talking about attendance, only 42% reported that a school official, including a teacher, contacted them personally about attendance in the past 6 months (Allison et al., 2017). How teachers support students who are chronically absent, particularly during these developmental years, becomes crucial for the student's academic success. In the same way, elementary school students are susceptible to their parent's or guardian's beliefs; they are also inclined to become molded by the support at the school they attend and their schoolteacher (Reichert et al., 2021).

Students within the elementary school age group are particularly influenced by teacher support because of their mental and physical development stage. The frontal, temporal, occipital, and parietal lobes all grow in size (Spielman et al., 2020). The brain growth spurts experienced in childhood tend to follow Piaget's (1936) sequence of cognitive development so that significant changes in neural functioning account for cognitive advances (Brod et al., 2017; Kolb & Whishaw, 2009; Overman et al., 1992). Elementary students observe, identify, learn, experience, and replicate behaviors, social norms, attitudes, and socioemotional skills. During these crucial years, cognitive development is a unique process specific to each school-age child. Sometimes school-age children may exhibit cognitive difficulties that affect their learning and impact their behavior. Understanding elementary school students' physical and emotional development during

these years helps researchers explain why predictable routines and curricula are necessary for educational growth. One applied research study by Dubay and Holla (2016) indicated that chronic absence in kindergarten and first grade might nearly eliminate the benefits of entering kindergarten with a robust set of skills that are typically associated with success in third grade. This study suggested that attendance in the early grades is critical to sustaining the school readiness skills that preschool or programs such as Head Start, a federal program designed to promote school readiness of children under 5 from low-income families through education, health, social and other services, help children develop (Dubay & Holla, 2016). Furthermore, Dubay and Holla (2016) and Hernandez (2011) found that students who arrived at school academically ready to learn but then missed 10% of their kindergarten and first-grade years scored an average of 60 points below similar students with good attendance on third grade reading tests. Additionally, students who are chronically absent during early elementary grades, when class time is mainly focused on developing the foundations for academic success through math and reading skills, are less likely to be reading proficiently by the third grade (Gottfried, 2019; Romero & Lee, 2007). Only about 17% of students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade read at grade level by the end of third grade, compared to 62% for those who regularly attend (Gottfried, 2019). This retarding of skills is immensely detrimental to a child's future academic success. Understanding this stage of development of elementary school students reinforces the importance of teachers being cognizant and consistent in the classroom in supporting their students.

Teacher Support of Elementary School Students

The importance of solid support relationships between a teacher and students' well-being has long been acknowledged (Buyse et al., 2009; Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Gutierrez &

Buckley, 2019; Rucinski et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2018). However, a review of the literature revealed no known studies that attempt to discover teachers' experiences in supporting and addressing chronically absent students, but it did reveal distinct implications of how chronic absenteeism affects students depending on when the phenomenon began. Elementary school students exclusively and typically rely on the adults in their life to make decisions for them and fully assist them in their educational endeavors (Tayler, 2015). This stage of development causes them increased vulnerability in various aspects of their young lives to include success in school. Teachers must cultivate support within their activities to bridge the gap between impediments many students face in attending school and acquiring the basic skills to progress. Positive teacher–student relationships lead to increased cooperation and engagement in the classroom. They also contribute to a welcoming, inclusive school climate that promotes equity, social and emotional learning, and improved student outcomes (Altavilla et al., 2021; Fraser & Walberg, 2005). When teachers intentionally support their students, it can foster a sense of belonging and connection, building a strong foundation for academic success. A closer examination of the teacher's classroom, the importance of their bond and personal commitment with students, and the support dynamics of the entire school will provide insight on teacher support on a focused level of understanding.

A Teacher's Classroom. School classrooms themselves contribute to high absence levels among young children (Chang & Romero, 2008). A schoolteacher's classroom atmosphere plays a vital role in helping to promote attendance in many ways. One way is to make attendance a priority, assisting parents in understanding that coming to school, particularly in elementary school, is vital to a child's long-term success. Effective and clear communications between the teacher and student families were found by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) to have a significant

impact on improving attendance and reducing chronic absence. A supportive, culturally responsive classroom environment fosters solid relationships and draws students into school. Strong conditions for learning buffer against external factors that affect chronic absence, while weak conditions heighten chronic absence (Buyse et al., 2009; Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Rucinski et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2009). Additionally, other than illness, social anxiety is one of the biggest reasons children do not come to school (Eklund et al., 020). Academic struggles and being bullied are also common reasons children avoid school. School avoidance related to feeling unsafe includes bullying, lack of supportive relationships, inconsistent rule clarity, the physical environment, and student belongingness (Williams et al., 2018). If a child feels like they are not wanted at school, are constantly failing, or are fearful of their peers, they may try to get out of going to school (Eklund et al., 2020).

Teachers who work to make their classrooms a nurturing place for their students also improve attendance rates. Research demonstrates a direct link between a poor school classroom climate and absenteeism (Buyse et al., 2009; Rucinski et al., 2018). Teacher support of elementary school students is critical to keep students engaged and attending. This type of support may begin at the start of class with greetings at the door in the forms of a handshake or hug. It may include bringing students together in a circle to talk through problems and conflicts or other youth enjoyment programs that focus on managing emotions or regulating behavior that research indicates is connected to improving attendance (Estell & Perdue, 2013; Hogekamp et al., 2016; Hughes & Kwok, 2006). Within social and emotional learning (SEL) constructs, teachers who support students' efforts improve the classroom environment. Various initiatives are all within a teacher's grasp and require individual efforts. Teachers practicing SEL seek to inspire and support students by challenging them to set individual, ongoing character

improvement, study skills goals, and buddy up their students with classmates to help in this process (Chandler, 2018; Jagers et al., 2019). Additionally, students should be taught to be respectful to themselves and others by attending to good physical and social–emotional health. Teachers must be especially attuned to how intimidating and unfamiliar school is for family members, such as recent immigrants or those struggling economically. Regardless of whether the SEL framework is adopted, teachers must create a positive classroom climate of environmental conditions likely to support students' healthy social and emotional development. When students have strong social and emotional skills, they are likely to contribute to a positive classroom climate (Chandler, 2018; Jagers et al., 2019).

Promoting a sense of classroom safety while keeping students enrolled is essential to academic achievement. Williams et al. (2018) indicated that students who disclosed bullying victimization (defined as aggressive, goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance) are at risk for depression and suicidal behavior. This type of abuse may lead to a generalized feeling of being unsafe; however, Williams et al. suggested that bullying is not the only factor involved in a perceived hazardous classroom. That is, feeling unsafe in the classroom is likely to result from an array of variables.

Williams et al. (2018) indicated that the classroom environment, such as feeling less safe in unsupervised and crowded locations, contributes to student fears. As an example, teachers might place mirrors next to the dry erase board and the chalkboard so that even when they have to turn their back to write on the board, they can still keep an eye on students. The school and classroom environment must be conducive to learning and provide students with a sense of safety and belonging (Kiefer et al., 2015; Van Ryzin et al., 2009). As an example, Williams et al. indicated that having a sound discipline model inside the classroom of clear expectations and

predetermined consequences increased feelings of safety for students. Consistent with the authoritative climate theory (Gregory et al., 2012), student support and disciplinary structures are essential components of a safe classroom environment and a conducive structure for learning. In addition to the atmosphere created by teachers within their classroom, students must also feel connected with support staff throughout the school, including school nurses, counselors, and administrators (Gutierrez & Buckley, 2019; Williams et al., 2018). Finally, Williams et al. maintained that the physical nature of the classroom is also essential. How the classroom is perceived as clean, organized, and maintained is relevant. A school should always be clean, orderly, and inviting. If there are papers on the floor or things falling out of desks, it is distracting. Students are more likely to feel safe when their classroom is well lit, hygienic, structured, climate-controlled, and without hazards. These considerations for teachers in supporting their students will create an environment that maintains student engagement and enthusiasm for attendance.

Teacher Connection and Emotional Support. Students spend much of their time with their teachers in school. As such, teacher support is vital to students' academic development, including learning and affective or emotional outcomes (Lei et al., 2018; Lewis & Taie, 2021; OECD, 2013; West, 2014). Many empirical studies have shown that teacher–student relationships were significantly positively correlated with a student's positive academic emotions (PAEs; Lei et al., 2018). A student's PAEs include their enjoyment, interest, hope, pride, and relief (King et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Mitchell & DellaMattera, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). In contrast, a student's negative academic emotions (NAEs) include anxiety, depression, shame, anger, worry, boredom, and hopelessness (King et al., 2012; Lei et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016; Mitchell & DellaMattera, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). When teachers cultivate a bonded

relationship with their students, the students are likely to enhance PAEs, and NAEs when the connection is lacking. This emotionally positive correlation has a positive impact on teacher job satisfaction within the profession (Claessens et al., 2017; Koenen et al., 2019; Lei et al., 2018).

Students who have had poor experiences with adults in the past have a hard time trusting a teacher. This distrust could apply to students whose previous teachers mistreated them and children from abusive or neglectful homes (Chin et al., 2020). Children from low-income or under-resourced backgrounds are most likely to have poor relationships with their teachers; however, they may benefit the most from positive teacher–student relationships because of the risks associated with poverty (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). The reasons for poor relationships within this demographic are complex. Still, they may include personal teacher biases, frequent student absences that build teacher resentment, or the extra time investment these students require to succeed (Chin et al., 2020). Behavioral or learning disorders sometimes make it hard for teachers and students to relate and build a crucial bond. Children with an autism spectrum disorder or learning disorders such as dyslexia or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder are frequent examples that may stress the ability for a teacher–student relationship (Ewe, 2019).

Solely improving students' relationships with their teachers will not produce gains in attendance and achievement. However, students who have close, positive, and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher attendance and achievement levels than those with more conflict in their relationships (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Students who are racially, socially, and economically marginalized, have learning exceptionalities, or are otherwise deemed at risk are more strongly influenced than others by the quality of relationships they form with teachers (Roorda et al., 2011). Obtaining consensus

among educational researchers is rare, yet little dispute exists that learning is enhanced when vital teacher–student relationships are established.

Reliability and Commitment of Teacher Support. Teachers must be consistently present to build relationships and support their students. The relationship between the teacher and student is mutually beneficial and critical in creating an environment that keeps the student engaged and eager to attend regularly and inspires the teacher to perform optimally and build professional satisfaction. In fact, establishing positive relationships between teachers and students, in which high levels of affiliation prevail, is one of the primary reasons for motivating students and retaining teachers within the profession (Claessens et al., 2017; Lei et al., 2018). In contrast, problematic teacher–student relationships are mentioned as sources of stress and negative emotions for both individuals (Koenen et al., 2019).

Students need to expect and depend on their teacher to be in the classroom when they arrive to build the relationship bond properly. Having a substitute teacher can be as negatively impactful to a student's achievement as if they missed school that day (Sawchuk, 2014). A literature review revealed that teacher attendance is directly related to their students' academic outcomes and attendance (Ahn & Vigdor, 2010; Miller et al., 2008; Rucinski et al., 2018; Sawchuk, 2014). Not only does it affect the academic achievement and attendance of students, but it also affects the overall running of the building and typical school routines. Frequently absent teachers affect many people and cause disruption (Sawchuk, 2014).

Research has long established that teachers are the most significant school-based inputs into student learning (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Empirical evidence now presents a persuasive case that teachers impact a range of student outcomes beyond test scores, including student absences, suspension rates, noncognitive skills, and college attendance (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Rucinski et

al., 2018). Although unrealistic to think that teachers will have perfect attendance, American teachers' absence rate is about 5.5% and much higher than the 3% average found in the U.S. workforce (Miller et al., 2008). Moreover, data from the U.S. DoE's Office for Civil Rights indicated that, on average, nearly 29% of teachers were considered chronically absent themselves, missing 10 or more school days in the 2015–2016 school year alone (Algozzine et al., 2012; Griffith, 2017; Miller et al., 2008). The Office for Civil Rights defines its school-level measure of teacher absence as the percentage of teachers absent for more than 10 days in a school year for reasons other than professional development (Griffith, 2017). What may be more alarming than having teachers chronically absent at nearly twice the rate of students on average is that absences are prolific in minority underperforming schools where teacher presence is needed the most (Algozzine et al., 2012).

The School Dynamics of Support

Positive school dynamics entice students to attend school regularly and continue to gain importance in the educational profession as a mechanism to support student success. A large body of school environmental research has linked a positive school climate with numerous positive outcomes for students, and research has linked elements of the school environment to outcomes for teachers (Konold et al., 2018; Maxwell et al., 2017; Voight & Nation, 2016). School environment refers to the set of relationships among members of a school community determined by structural, personal, and functional factors of the educational institution and are all critical factors when evaluating student well-being (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020). Environmental support efforts for students range from teacher and staff attitudes to the physical structure and accommodation of the school building. Such often overlooked school support efforts may include everything from how teachers greet students, view inclusiveness, and mood

to how well lit the classroom is, how technology is used, and general appearance during the school day. Regardless of the specifics, research has indicated that the quality of these school practices and infrastructure conditions can directly affect children's behavior and cognitive, social, and emotional development (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020).

For students to stay engaged and learn, the school must be a place to feel comfortable, safe, and connected. As students navigate any number of circumstances during their educational journey, their school dynamics will play a critical role in supporting or hindering them through the learning process (Capp et al., 2021). School programs designed to assist students outside of the classroom are as important as those efforts to reduce absences. One support effort within many school districts attempts to help students and families manage educational development during illness.

Where prolonged illnesses prevent students from regularly attending, some school districts participate in various programs that bring the classroom to the student. One such program is medical homebound instruction (MHI). MHI provides all students with injuries and temporary or chronic illnesses that preclude their attendance in school, including students who are not eligible for special education and related services, instruction by qualified teachers at home. MHI services vary from state to state and within school districts. Although federal law mandates educational services for students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), MHI for students with injuries or temporary, chronic illnesses is not considered mandatory relief. This support is crucial for students who do not meet the criteria under current law. Other school support initiatives are less complicated.

In California, items as simple as washing machines have supported many students and become a support service idea that has spread across the country (Richardson, 2016). David

Weir, Principal at the K–8 Preparatory Academy, a Title I school in Fairfield, California, learned that dirty clothes were often one reason children missed school. If children were unaware of their less-than-clean clothing, other students harassed them. If students did not have clean clothes to wear, they just skipped school until clean laundry was available (Richardson, 2016). Doing laundry is a challenge for many low-income families. Families without washers and dryers must travel to a laundromat, which can be problematic because of transportation, the cost of doing multiple loads of laundry, and often managing many children on the journey. Even families with a washer and dryer may lack detergent, electricity, and dependable water. Whirlpool provided and installed the machines to support the schools and provided detergent and canvas laundry bags with the company logo. With laundry facilities on campus, students bring their clothes to be washed and pick up donated items such as socks and deodorant. Richardson (2016) found the community response to be optimistic:

> I believe that every parent gets up in the morning and wants to do the best they can for their kids. But not everyone has the same opportunities and the same resources. If the school can make a difference and change their child's ability to get to school and, therefore, their life, I will embrace it. I will do anything possible to get my kids to school. (p. 1)

In other instances, the literature revealed that the school improved student attendance by offering winter clothing, backpacks, school supplies, alarm clocks, bus tokens, or even complimentary breakfast in the morning (Sugrue et al., 2016). Although there are many other school-related influences on reducing absenteeism, one last example is the importance of afterschool programs related to students' sense of support and belonging.

Afterschool programs for students have operated for over a century, and for much of that time, their primary concern has centered on essential childcare and safety, especially for children living in dangerous communities (Coughlan et al., 2014; Halpern, 2002). However, afterschool programs are increasingly working to support school efforts to improve reading and mathematics outcomes (Baker et al., 2019). Baker et al. (2019) indicated that many afterschool programs in urban settings serve a high percentage of students who benefit from academic support. In addition to reading and mathematics, afterschool programs may also provide various services such as mental health, general health and fitness, music, sports and clubs, cultural enrichment, and a safe place to stay with adult supervision for children. Unfortunately, only 50% to 75% of public elementary schools in the United States maintain partial or complete afterschool programs (Sliwa et al., 2019).

Discovering the experiences of how elementary schools support students who are chronically absent for independent reasons will enhance how educational leaders approach such individualized interventions. Getting a student back on track with school attendance is not enough. Teachers, faculty, and staff need to continue making all students feel welcomed at school. Finding ways to get students back into the building is step one and found throughout various literature, from providing laundry services to placing parents in jail when they do not get their students to school. The academic body of work lacks step two, marrying the first step to changing culture that will pursue families to ensure their student is attending. When implemented, this shift in culture through the school environment sends a clear message to the student and family that they are genuinely missed when absent and are individually valuable to the school community. Empty seats may have economic ramifications for a school, but continually filling the hearts and minds and raising the spirits of students have significant social,

emotional, and educational benefits (Jagers et al., 2019). These concepts directly attack the many presumptions found in the literature that students, their families, or communities from certain societal aspects do not participate because they do not want to or value education; research suggested otherwise.

Although multifaceted in causation, students are people, and people require basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs to be met (Maslow, 1954). Therefore, how schools support their students is one way to attain success. Further, the research literature demonstrated that the economics of a school and district weighs much heavier than any particular race when measured against absent students. Chang and Romero (2008) indicated, "Indeed, low resources are a more significant factor of chronic absenteeism than race" (p. 8). The bottom line for many students, regardless of presumptions, particularly within economically depressed areas, is that how the dynamics of a school are set up to support its students may make all the difference in educational success or failure.

Community Efforts of Support in the Classroom

Chronic absenteeism is a target area for many school districts to improve student graduation and achievement. To raise student attendance, graduation rates, and academic success, schools often try to identify who is chronically absent and determine if there are cohesive subgroups of children most affected. These subgroups may include recent immigrants, single-parent households, or caregivers with economic or health challenges (Lim et al., 2019). These initiatives to level attendance barriers are designed to support students and build relationships between teachers and the student's families. This support only makes sense from a professional standpoint. Students who are not supported are more likely to lack reading skills, have lower math test scores, receive exclusionary school discipline, and are in higher jeopardy of

not graduating (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Ehrlich et al., 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2019). The effects of dropout and low academic achievement permeate well past the apparent implications and stretch into the community, sometimes for generations.

Similar to families, communities must come together to solve their problems. They must reflect and analyze the issue to help arrive at a solution. Addressing chronic absenteeism in a community is no different. Even though the federal and state governments play an essential role, communities must look internally for tailored solutions that are specific to their public interest. Regardless of the endeavor, local leaders need to get involved in solving their own problems. Although there are successful initiatives to improve chronic absenteeism rates, the literature reveals no single solution. There is extensive research on programs designed to increase school attendance; unfortunately, very few meet even a minimum standard of rigor. A 2012 meta-analysis conducted by the Campbell Collaboration identified 391 studies of truancy interventions, only 28 of which provided any reasonable basis for determining that the program was effective (Maynard et al., 2013). Community leaders and teachers must analyze the contributing factors associated with root causes that contribute to scores of absences and actively seek tailored supportive ways that get students to school and keep them there.

Across the country, there are wide-ranging community initiatives to reduce chronic absenteeism in elementary and other schools. Attendance Works, a leading national organization providing tools and resources for schools to reduce chronic absenteeism, recommends a tiered approach to improve student attendance using response to intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). One example of a tiered approach is found in the New Jersey Department of Education. The New Jersey tiered system of supports (NJTSS) is New Jersey's model of a tiered framework of supports based on RTI and MTSS.

NJTSS promotes the organization of academic, behavioral, and health supports and interventions into three levels offered to all students based on their individual needs (State of New Jersey, 2018). Developing strategies that focus on individual needs while systematically cultivating a culture of attendance year-round provides the best chance to improve attendance.

In the Baltimore City area, the community has instituted the Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, attempting to build on the collective energy of city and state agencies, parents, students, universities, foundations, public interest groups, and nonprofits. Its goals are to improve access to attendance data, develop positive preventions and early intervention strategies, address barriers to regular attendance, and initiate a campaign to make attendance a high priority city-wide (Gottfried, 2019). In California, anti-truancy laws levy hefty fines and even jail time for parents of students who are chronically absent (Monaham et al., 2014). Although there is no single solution recognized as a best practice amongst educators and political leaders, what is certain is that any local initiative will require teacher buy-in. A review of the literature surrounding local initiatives has revealed many locations where teachers are invested in supporting students in decreasing absenteeism rates.

Community Focused Support

Durham et al. (2019) indicated that students who are chronically absent would require significant investments from the entire community to increase school attendance through a full-service community school strategy. All too often, stakeholders only concentrate on policies, procedures, sanctions, treatments, and other methods to react to student absenteeism instead of proactively maintaining and boosting school attendance through committed effort (Kearney et al., 2019). Kearney et al. (2019) indicated that the notion of multidimensional intervention means that proactive, preventative measures must be emphasized and tailored to individual schools,

jurisdictions, and cultures. Schoolteachers are often expected to implement the latest absenteeism prevention program alone. Okilwa and Barnett (2017) found that teachers cannot achieve academic success single-handedly. A team approach that involves teachers, parents, and the community makes the work of turning around schools and sustaining educational excellence a more manageable endeavor. While prevention programs may take many forms, an evidence-based practice helps a resiliency perspective that links school, home, and community.

Education Delivery Techniques

Project-based learning (PjBL) in elementary school is a teaching method that involves placing students in real-world activities, enabling them to work with the material to be learned. It intimately connects disciplinary content and disciplinary practices in which students gain knowledge and skills by working on a project for an extended period (Juuti et al., 2021; Reid-Griffin et al., 2020). PjBL has been shown to work in all kinds of schools, in different grade levels, and with students of varying backgrounds and abilities (Leggett & Harrington, 2021). It has also been shown to improve attendance. Creghan and Adair-Creghan (2015) indicated that in Texas, students within an economically depressed location attended similar demographic and size schools approximately two miles apart, one offering PjBL and the other without the PjBL model and curriculum; attendance increased significantly at the PjBL-focused school. Zusevics et al. (2013) observed,

> Because PjBL appears to affect the attendance rates of students, as evidenced by the results of various studies, an effective implementation of PjBL methodology may lead to more of our economically disadvantaged students attending school regularly and actively striving toward graduation. (p. 10)

Where PjBL practices were utilized across the country, the instructional methodology increased attendance, graduation rates, and overall academic achievement (Leggett & Harrington, 2021).

Teacher–Parent Partnership

A common phrase is, "It takes a village to raise a child" (Hees, 2000). When families and community members are involved in student learning, students improve their academic performance, regularly attend school, and gain advocates promoting their success. Parent and community engagement has long been a focus for schools; however, parental involvement in education declines as children complete their elementary school years, dropping dramatically once they reach middle school. In 2016, 90% of third- through fifth-grade students had a parent who attended a parent–teacher conference, compared with 73% of middle school students (Holloway & Park, 2015). A significant problem facing schools is making it crucial for districts to evaluate their family–community initiatives to promote increased involvement (Baker et al., 2016).

Regular communication between teachers and parents is critical. Teachers must consistently endeavor to emphasize to parents the importance of academics, to know their students, their student's social circle and habits, to name a few. Some evidence indicates that simply informing parents about the link between attendance and academic achievement reduces absences. Schools reported reduced absences after sending postcards that told kindergarten parents of this connection and included the number of days their child had missed (Allen et al., 2018). These critical areas of support are needed to help students in staying engaged. By engaging family and community members in students' school experiences, teachers better support development, performance, and attendance.

Summary

This literature review acknowledged the relationship between how teachers are needed to address and support chronically absent elementary school students for them to succeed. The research presented in this chapter addressed the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism, teacher support of students who are chronically absent, elementary school students' need for help, life circumstances, geographic locations and family matters surrounding the phenomenon, the often-unfair stigma associated, and federal and local initiatives. The social determination theory provided the framework for how teachers support chronically absent elementary students through three constructs labeled competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The competence construct seeks to control the outcome and experience in one's life, the autonomy construct attempts to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life, and the relatedness construct explains the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Jungert et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Due to the lack of research regarding elementary school teachers' actual experiences providing support to chronically absent students, I chose to address the literature that focused on multiple aspects of the phenomenon that demonstrate the complexity of the problem and what initiatives and efforts have materialized over time. Research on how elementary school teachers support students who are chronically absent allows for additional insight into shared experiences. It provides a better understanding of the significance of teacher support and its effect on chronic absenteeism, ultimately driving up attendance and community health.

Researching how elementary school teachers in the southeastern United States address and support students who are chronically absent brought new knowledge to this phenomenon.

Additionally, the body of existing literature was extended and should assist educational and community leaders in building teacher–student relationships, teacher–parent communication, and specific student needs. Moreover, this research provided a better understanding of the phenomenon while removing the associated bias and stigma often attached to students who are chronically absent. In this way, educational leaders are now better equipped to address chronic absenteeism as a priority in their plans, policies, and duties.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Chapter Three begins with a discussion of the design used for this research study, followed by a description of the study's deliberate setting and participants. Following this discussion, I included the research positionality, framework, philosophical assumptions, and my role as a researcher. Afterward, an examination of the procedures, data collection, and data analysis processes is discussed in describing how I acquired teachers' experiences in supporting and addressing students who are chronically absent while being responsible for their academic success. Chapter Three concludes by discussing the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations within the research study.

Research Design

I chose a qualitative research method with a phenomenological design utilizing a transcendental phenomenological (TPh) approach for this research study. Educational leaders do not want to only look at problems as they appear “subjectively” but gain perspective on how things are in reality “objectively” (Larkin et al., 2006). As a researcher, the chosen method, approach, and design through data collection methods of a semi-structured interview process, focus groups, and an emailed open-ended writing prompt were best suited to gather the experiences of how teachers addressed and supported students who were chronically absent.

Qualitative methodologies are very different from quantitative methodologies in collecting and analyzing data; qualitative research deals with words and meanings, whereas quantitative research deals with numbers and statistics (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Qualitative

research is the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings (Eyisi, 2016). Berg and Howard (2012) characterized qualitative research as meanings, concepts, definitions, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. Qualitative research also involves observing gestures, postures, and body language unveiling data by digging deeper into participants' lives, connecting different parts of interviews, and leveraging contradictions (Willig & Rogers, 2017). The rapport and trust between the researcher and the participant allows for the development of a complex picture of the problem and issue under investigation (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selecting a qualitative research method allowed me to conduct a deep examination of how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent by gathering and analyzing their professional experiences. Within the various designs of qualitative research, TPh allows the researcher to describe the phenomenon's meaning by exploring it from the perspective of those who experienced it to understand the meaning participants ascribe to that phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015).

Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician, is considered the founder of phenomenology as a philosophy and the descriptive approach to inquiry (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Phenomenology, utilized and built upon throughout the 20th century, is essentially the study of lived experience or the life world (Van Manen, 1990). The life world is understood as what humans experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to labeling or conceptualization, and quite often includes what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense (Husserl, 1970). Its emphasis is on the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person. The TPh design was perfectly aligned with the purpose of this research study in that the design prompted teachers to discuss their involvement through the chosen data gathering methods and allowed me to bring meaning as the researcher. To this end, I leveraged a

TPh approach to give a voice and provide convergent reasoning in making sense of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019; Van Manen, 2014).

TPh, primarily developed by Husserl (1931), is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experiences (Sheehan, 2014). Pure TPh is grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside all preconceived ideas, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomenon to naturally emerge and within a person's own identity (Moustakas, 1994). This method's general focus is to examine the essence or structure of experiences in how it occurs within a participant's consciousness (Tuffour, 2017). Approaching this research with TPh capitalized on interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and brought an objective new perspective on how teachers addressed and supported elementary students who were chronically absent. IPA has become a dominant qualitative research methodology in many academic disciplines (Tuffour, 2017). Its emphasis is on convergence and divergence of experiences and helps examine detailed and nuanced lived experiences within a small number of participants (Smith et al., 2009).

The chosen design for this research project captured the experiences of teachers who were directly involved with student chronic absenteeism while being responsible for all their success, particularly amongst minority, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk student populations. These specific areas of interest were revealed where student chronic absenteeism predominately resides and negatively affects students the most. Teacher experiences shed light through a deep examination and provide educational leaders with new implications and perspectives.

Research Questions

Research Question One

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the competence of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

Research Question Two

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the autonomy of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

Research Question Three

How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing needs of relatedness of elementary school students who are chronically absent?

Setting and Participants

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, I conducted this research with knowledgeable participants in their natural settings and attempted to interpret the phenomenon in terms of the experiences they brought and provided. The purpose of this section is first to offer detail and reasons why the setting for this research was chosen and suggests the best opportunity to answer the research questions. Additionally, this section will describe the criteria for each intended participant.

Setting

I conducted this research in the southeastern United States, concentrating on both the Herculean and Spartan school districts (pseudonyms). As a researcher, I chose the southeastern United States, specifically starting in Alabama, for several reasons that align with the problem, purpose, and theoretical framework. The southeastern United States is the fastest-growing region

in the country, has higher poverty rates, lower median incomes, and lower educational attainment than other regions in the country, with a significant number of residents living in rural communities (Lee, 2020; Robson et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021). Additionally, more than one third of all K–12 students live in the southeastern United States, including 56% of all Black students in the nation (Robson et al., 2019). The South is also home to substantial portions of the nation's English language learners (ELLs) and migrant student populations (Robson et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2017). Researchers have indicated that students from these demographics are at greater risk of being chronically absent from school (Gottfried, 2014; Ready, 2010). As such, the Herculean and Spartan school districts were prime research settings.

The Herculean and Spartan school districts are the largest and fastest-growing school districts in Alabama. Community officials in the Herculean and Spartan school districts stressed the importance of good attendance, with the Herculean school district establishing an attendance task force during the 2018–2019 school year. The efforts have concentrated on Grades K–12 and have incorporated specific goals and strategies for elementary school students, understanding the importance of early education and attendance habits. One official indicated that they have not met their "pretty high" goal of 95% attendance but have made many efforts in formulating new strategies. Designating September as attendance awareness month in 2018, the task force filed 210 petitions in court for truancy, referred cases to school officials to make calls, conducted home visits, and even visited parents at their job when needed. During this same period, Alabama as a whole remained stagnant with an average of 15.71% chronic absenteeism rate when reporting under the Every Student Succeeds Act (Alabama Department of Education Report Card, 2021), while the Herculean school district cut chronic absenteeism in half.

Participants

This research study included a sample of 12 elementary school teachers from different schools within the southeastern United States, from both the Herculean, Spartan, and geographically adjacent school districts. The purpose of focusing on elementary school teachers instead of middle or high school teachers is linked to data that reveals absenteeism patterns, attitudes, behaviors, and implications begin in kindergarten and increase throughout middle and high school (Allen et al., 2014). The CRDC (2016) indicated that 11% of elementary students, 12.5% of middle school students, and 18.9% of high school students were chronically absent during the 2013–2014 school year. Along with this upward trajectory of school absenteeism beginning in elementary school, students develop patterns of behaviors and habits that may eventually lead to delinquency and eventual incompletion of high school. Specifically, Romero and Lee (2007) revealed that absenteeism in kindergarten is associated with adverse first-grade outcomes and greater absenteeism in subsequent years, and lower achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge. Regardless of the reason for the absences, discovering how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent in elementary school provides an opportunity for educational leaders to develop policy and assistance early on in a student's educational journey that may enable them towards eventual preparedness and graduation.

I used purposeful convenience sampling to identify 12 elementary school teachers who have experiences in supporting students who are chronically absent. Purposeful convenience sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases related to a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Within purposeful convenience sampling, participants should be comprised of those easy to contact or reach (Creswell, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). I screened for those

participants who were elementary school teachers in the southeastern United States and had experience in supporting and addressing the needs of students who were chronically absent during their teaching career.

Face and content validity, or how suitable the screening survey's content seems to be on the surface, was met by limiting the scope of questions specific to this topic and validation during the pilot testing (Creswell, 2019). In doing so, I asked limited and generalized demographic data and a limited number of straightforward questions concerning their exposure and support of students who are chronically absent to screen for potential participants. Additionally, qualitative research often calls for the researcher to continue building and identifying the sample throughout fieldwork as new opportunities arise through discussion with participants (Patton, 2015). I remained open during the identification process and gathered names of other potential participants with similar experiences as the opportunity presented itself. This snowball sampling proved helpful as teachers collaborated within their professional learning communities and identified colleagues who fit the exact criteria that I set forth for the participants in this study. As the participants for this study were selected, they recommended several colleagues from nearby school districts for me to contact as potential participants. With 18 potential elementary schools within the Herculean and Spartan school districts and recommendations from volunteers, I obtained 12 teacher participants who met the purposeful sampling criteria. Creswell (2019), Patton (2015), and Creswell and Poth (2018) encouraged researchers to obtain the maximum variance of diversity among general and specific characteristics within their research studies. Therefore, gender, ethnicity, and race were not disqualifiers for this phenomenological study, although women were the only volunteers.

Researcher Positionality

Undoubtedly, all previous experiences and decisions in a person's life have brought them precisely to where they find themselves; I am no different. I am not an educator by trade, nor have I worked within the public school system in any capacity. I am an active-duty Army Colonel. I enlisted in the Army in 1987 and have been in uniform ever since. I have lived all over the world and have many experiences, deployments, and proficiencies. People generally view me as an accomplished, educated, and successful leader. With that said, during my adolescent years, I often moved, grew up in a city environment, went to a predominantly minority high school, and was chronically absent. There were periods when I regularly attended; however, I missed upward of 60 days in my senior year alone. Looking back, I am left to wonder what, if anything, my teachers might have done to support me and better prepare my skills before graduation. I also wonder what they thought of me and what unintentional difficulties I might have made for them and my fellow students by my continuous absence. I am motivated to conduct this research to discover how teachers support students who are chronically absent to improve potential outcomes for students who find themselves in environments of similar low expectations as I found myself decades ago.

I was fortunate to have not succumbed to the low expectations of that time and become another failed statistic. With this personal experience in mind, I bracketed myself out of the research. The focus was not on me but on providing a voice to each teacher in discovering how they currently support students who are chronically absent and address this phenomenon amongst minorities, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk student populations, such as myself more than 30 years ago, within their community.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework, or research paradigm, guiding the way I conducted this research was through the lens of social constructivism. Through the concept of social constructivism, educators formulate means through which individuals enhance their academic learning, erudition, and intellectual skills and learn to establish a connection between their attitudes, norms, values, behavioral traits, actions, and emotions (Akpan et al., 2020). Sterian and Mocanu (2016) explained that social constructivism posits that knowledge creation cannot be separated from the social environment in which it is formed; knowledge is constructed through social support.

A student's socialization and education are strongly influenced by the expectations that they believe are placed on them by their parents, teachers, and friends. With this idea, educational influences come from every family member and peer as agents of social skills and every teacher as an agent of educational attainment and represent a direct expression of the relationships established (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The emphasis within this paradigm is on human relationships and on learning through actively participating in social settings. The overall purpose of education, therefore, is for learners to co-create knowledge and form identities. Learning is situated and occurs continuously through collaboration between the person and the social context.

The goal of this research was to rely as much as possible on the shared experiences of the elementary school teacher participants' views to answer the research questions. Through the use of broad and general open-ended questioning within three data gathering methods, participant data ultimately provided rich experiences formed through teacher interactions with chronically absent students in the practice of their profession. The level of potential academic achievement is

the level of development that the student can reach under the support and guidance of teachers in collaboration with others in the student's life in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness skills.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions made during this research were derived from ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives. Qualitative research is explicitly interpretive. As a researcher, I acknowledged that the analytical data analysis process for this research study involved interpreting other people's meanings, values, experiences, opinions, and behaviors. Understanding the importance of my philosophical assumptions when coupled with the framework helped support my discovery of how elementary school teachers in the southeastern United States support chronically absent students.

Ontological Assumption

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the ontological assumptions are those that respond to the questions of what is there that can be known and what is the nature of reality. For this research study, I used research methods and techniques of the interpretive design to draw multiple realities from the participant that have been socially constructed together by their individual experiences in supporting students who are chronically absent from school. Their individual and personal truths formed the data for the study and provided me with substantial understandings that I used to interpret and make sense of their experiences.

I follow a biblical reality. God’s goodness means that there is an absolute and personal standard of righteousness. This virtue exists along with his eternal hope for humanity (Sire, 2009). This belief commands every effort to find ways of allowing all to reach their full potential. However, I understood that the research participants were likely to offer multiple

realities for this project and may not have shared my biblical beliefs.

Epistemological Assumption

Neubauer et al. (2019) indicated that within the researcher's epistemological assumptions, the critical question becomes, What is there for an individual to know or be conscious of within a phenomenon? Knowledge is gained through an empathic understanding of participants' lived social realities, experiences, and insights. This idea pushes well past sensory perceptions and delves into the participants' opinions, thoughts, memories, and emotions (Neubauer et al., 2019).

For this research project, the epistemological assumption was interpretivism. Within the epistemological assumption of interpretivism, knowledge was individually and socially constructed; knowledge was gained through personal experiences and perceptions (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Within this interpretive assumption, I was searching for meanings of the participants' experiences through a shared context, culture, and value bond by cooperatively interacting with each participant amongst different data gathering methods. In the end, I desired to obtain information on what the participants thought and have done, what type of problems they were confronted with, and how they dealt with those problems when supporting chronically absent students through the guiding social-determination theory.

Axiological Assumption

Lincoln et al. (2011) indicated that axiology is concerned with how values and assumptions of the research influence the scientific process and other actions the researcher takes with the research study. These include the researcher's emotions, expectations, and values. Particular qualities within this research study are not central to the process and are not intended to produce an intended outcome.

The research participants selected for this study were likely to offer multiple realities and

may not have shared my biblical values as a researcher. However, I believe commonality is found in the profession of leadership and education, and as such, we all share a desire to support children to develop and become productive citizens. Although I have no professional experiences with elementary school students, as I became close to the research participants through the course of this research, I developed an empathic understanding of their challenges in supporting students who are chronically absent after having myself been chronically absent while attending school. With this in mind, I aimed to bracket my values and experience out of the research process.

Researcher's Role

In contrast to other designs, the qualitative approach includes the researcher's comments about their role and self-reflection. Particularly in qualitative research, the researcher's role as the primary data collection instrument necessitates identifying personal values, assumptions, and biases at the study's outset (Creswell, 2019). The investigator's contribution to the research setting is valuable and positive rather than detrimental (Creswell, 2019). The credibility of qualitative methods depends on the researcher's skill, competence, and rigor (Golafshani, 2003). Creswell (2019) indicated that to describe how participants view the phenomenon fully, researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences. To this end, as a human instrument, I continuously worked to bracket out my experiences of being chronically absent during my high school years and focused on the participating teachers of the study through my reflexive journal. I had no previous relationship with any participant, nor did I imply any authority over them. Keeping in mind that not all chronic absenteeism contains negative connotations similar to my own experiences, as a researcher, I continued to remind myself of the potential for bias. Before each interview, I prompted myself to focus on the participant or

participants and not my personal history. As a researcher, I wanted the purest data and removed any bias or assumptions that I may have had through my own experiences.

Procedures

As a research study, the first step was to acquire written letters from the Herculean and Spartan school districts (pseudonyms) permitting me to conduct research in their school districts. Upon acquiring permission, I defended my proposal and obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University. The first step after acquiring IRB approval was to pilot test the data gathering protocols with three elementary school teachers who were not involved in the research to offer feedback and improve questions, format, and instructions. I used the pilot tested protocols of open-ended questions to conduct data gathering techniques. Pilot testing the data collection protocols through mock interviews amongst unrelated elementary school teachers ensured the guide's suitability and improved the questions, format, and interview technique in advance (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Permissions

As noted above, the first step in obtaining permissions was to acquire written letters from the Herculean and Spartan school districts permitting me to conduct research in their school districts. Those letters were temporarily placed in Appendix A and later replaced with the IRB approval letter to preserve the confidentiality of these school districts (see Appendix A).

Since I had already acquired both school district's written permission, the next steps were to defend my research proposal and obtain IRB approval from Liberty University. I did not solicit or correspond with any potential state, district, school, or participant until I received approval from the Liberty University IRB. After I received these approvals in order, I completed

the pilot testing with the unrelated elementary school teachers noted earlier and then began the recruitment process.

Recruitment Plan

Concurrently with pilot testing the data gathering protocols, I sought gatekeepers within the Herculean and Spartan school districts to assist me in recruiting potential qualified participants by emailing the school principal and assistant principal at each elementary school in the districts. This initial engagement requested permission and recommendations as to the best means of acquiring access to teachers through the gatekeeper concept (see Appendices B and C). Gatekeepers in qualitative research provide access to the site, allow or permit the research to be done, and can assist in this endeavor (Creswell, 2013, 2019). In keeping with the recruitment strategy for qualitative research in soliciting participants as indicated by Creswell (2013), I ensured that I included pertinent information about the study's nature, how I came to select their school district through analysis, how the research would benefit their community, and what type of participants I was seeking. In each instance where I received a return correspondence, either the principal or assistant principal became the gatekeeper by indicating that they would serve as the conduit between myself and potential volunteers.

Phase 1 of the recruitment process, as mentioned above, began with seeking gatekeepers and emailing a short research flyer and recruitment letter to the sample pool (see Appendices B and C). The research flyer, or advertisement, was intended to spark potential interest in participating in the study amongst faculty in various elementary schools within each district. The recruitment letter, also attached to the email, contained a link and QR code to the screening survey (see Appendix D). This self-generated screening survey sought to identify teachers who have experienced and supported students who are chronically absent to participate in the research

study. After nearly 4 weeks, I had not received a sufficient number of individuals who had completed the screening survey, met the participant criteria, and agreed to participate in the study. As a final attempt, I first sent an email to the Spartan school district (see Appendix E) to obtain their support in distributing my request one last time. As a judgement call, I kept the Herculean school district in reserve and did not send them a final recruitment notice. If I had not obtained the remaining four participants from the Spartan school district, I intended to travel to the Herculean school district and meet each school principal face-to-face to establish better rapport and gain encouragement in recruiting the final required qualified teachers.

In the final notice to the Spartan school district, I conveniently included both the survey link and the QR code on the face of the email that I requested they forward to their district's teachers. This minor convenience modification to the structure of the email produced the remaining four participants. Thus, the recruitment procedures concluded approximately 5 weeks after it started and supplied 12 qualified participants.

The screening survey (see Appendix D) gathered general demographic information about each teacher and only a few narrow and direct questions regarding a willingness to participate and their experiences in supporting students who have been chronically absent. Once I obtained the 12 qualified participants, two more than the minimum required attempting to hedge against any participant attrition, I sent an official notification email (see Appendix F) confirming qualification and participation with a link to the Consent Form (see Appendix G). Participants were instructed to acknowledge consent within an online form format and indicate their preference for a face-to-face or virtual interview, the best day and time during the week they were most available, and which week they would like to begin: (a) as soon as possible, (b) next week, or (c) the week after spring break. Once I received each consent form and analyzed the

desire of the research participant, I returned a copy to each participant and worked with them individually through telephone calls and email to accommodate them based on their responses.

Data Collection Plan

I collected data for this research through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and an emailed open-ended writing prompt. Creswell (2013) indicated that the qualitative researcher collects data by examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the techniques of individual engagement, group discussion, and written answers within the three chosen methods helped me achieve triangulation (Creswell, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). I used these data sources to seek answers to the research questions.

Before I began collecting data, I engaged in *epoché.* Husserl (1931) called the freedom from suppositions the *epoché*, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain (Moustakas, 1994). In qualitative phenomenological research, researchers must set aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things. To achieve *epoché*, I intentionally interrupted the tendency to overlay my personal assumptions on interpretations of chronically absent students and relied solely on the experiences and perceptions of the study's participants. As Moustakas (1994) recommended, I dedicated periods of self-reflection in a quiet, uninterrupted location to explicitly determine any predispositions in written format within my reflexive journal (see Appendix L). In this way, I became prepared to meet each participant and to listen and hear whatever was being presented, without labeling or judging, or comparing what was said against my thoughts. I was ready to receive and know how teachers support chronically absent

elementary school students from the phenomenon's appearance and presence and not from unconscious bias.

Individual Interviews

As the first research source of data collection, I used semi-structured interviews with all 12 participants. Qualitative research provides an in-depth focus on a small sample of participants selected for a specific purpose (Creswell, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). I offered each participant a choice to conduct their semi-structured interview face-to-face or virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform. The preferred method for the interviews was face-to-face; however, all qualified participants requested to meet within Microsoft Teams.

The intent of completing the interviews face-to-face was to use that opportunity for each teacher participant to become comfortable with me as a researcher to collect their answers and experiences regarding students who are chronically absent. Although there are other interview techniques, face-to-face provides the best chance at reading body language, facial expressions, and emotions behaving within their context (Creswell, 2019; Patton, 2015). However, I gained tremendous experience and familiarity using virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no significant loss of data gathering in accomplishing the interviews virtually.

Qualitative studies that utilize open-ended questions allow researchers to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the studied issues. Because open-ended responses permitted respondents to provide more options and opinions, this method gave the data more diversity than would be possible with a closed-question or forced-choice survey measure (Allen, 2017; Creswell, 2019; Patton, 2015). I began each interview with two icebreaker questions to bring about a comfortable situation for each teacher participant (Creswell, 2013). It is essential for each participant to feel comfortable and open up about their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews began from the premise that a power imbalance existed between me and the participants. In doing this interview in Microsoft Teams, I mitigated that imbalance through icebreaker questions and allowed for a comfortable exchange of ideas and experiences. Once the teacher participant was relaxed, I moved on to the open-ended questions directly related to the research. While asking these open-ended questions, I remained focused on the central phenomenon of this study of how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent while being responsible for these students' academic success. Each open-ended question was designed to provide the participants maximum opportunity to elaborate on any information or knowledge concerning their shared experiences and was in line with self-determination theory (SDT). I concluded each interview by asking the participants who might know more about this topic and thanked them for their time (Creswell, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Logistically, I traveled to the proximity of the Herculean and Spartan school districts in Alabama to be available in case a participant needed to conduct the interview face-to-face, or if any participants withdrew from the study. This contingency strategy, although not needed, bettered my chances of ensuring I gathered the data in a timely manner and was ready to address any changes in circumstance amongst the 12 participants. I scheduled each interview at a time and location convenient to the participant that provided the best situation to gather data. Each interview was scheduled in advance and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. I recorded the discussion on a multi-password-protected laptop and voice-activated recorder (Kaiser, 2009; Patton, 2015). I used a transcription service to transcribe each interview for analysis purposes, verified each transcription against the recordings, and allowed each participant to confirm the accuracy of the transcript as a member check. The interview protocol, or interview guide, used for each participant included the following questions (see Appendix N):

Individual Interview Questions

1. Explain your favorite part of being a teacher. (Icebreaker)
2. Describe what you felt the first day in the classroom in front of your students. (Icebreaker)
3. Describe your experiences in addressing and supporting students who have been chronically absent. (Research Question [RQ] 1, RQ2, RQ3)
4. Describe your knowledge and interactions with students who are chronically absent in building their competence, that is, building their skills for controlling the outcomes and experiences in their lives. (RQ1)
5. Describe any investment or support, in or outside the school, that you provide to students who are chronically absent in terms of time, accommodation, emotional support, or any other type of support that builds student competence. (RQ1)
6. Describe your knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent in building their autonomy, that is, building their skills and desire to be in control of their own life. (RQ2)
7. Describe common, if any, characteristics in the autonomy of students who are chronically absent, or the students' actions that demonstrate their need to control their own life. (RQ2)

    Probe – Describe these students' everyday needs of autonomy based on your personal experiences. (RQ2)

    Probe – Describe how these students appear motivated, self-sufficient, and resilient and how you address any noticeable needs to help them control their own life. (RQ2)
8. Describe your relationship with students who are chronically absent, focusing on any

support activities used to build the autonomy needed for them to succeed. (RQ2)

9. Describe and explain your thoughts on your responsibility in building student autonomy as part of your student's academic success. (RQ2)
10. Describe your knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent in building their relatedness, or the student's ability to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others. (RQ3)
11. Describe and explain any impediments or barriers you have experienced in supporting and addressing your efforts to build relatedness with students who are chronically absent. (RQ3)

    Probe – Describe any difficulties in building student relatedness, or difficulties for them to stay connected to and be cared for, that becomes apparent to you when students are not present and then return. (RQ3)

12. Describe any experiences where community and school efforts have worked, or not worked, in lowering chronic absenteeism. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
13. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. I appreciate the time you have given to this research study thus far and will have our interview transcribed. Once I have the transcription completed, I will email the transcription to you for the validation of our conversation. Once all interviews are conducted, transcribed, and validated, I will schedule our online focus groups utilizing Microsoft Teams. There will be several dates and times to choose from to ensure you are able to participate. This second data collection method will enrich the research information and provide group dynamics to the research questions. Are there any questions or anything you would like to add before we conclude? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Questions 1 and 2 are icebreaker questions that prompted the teacher participants to talk about themselves and become comfortable with the interview arrangement. Icebreaker questions are often used to relax the participant and begin the interview process (Creswell, 2013). These questions were designed to be relatively straightforward and non-threatening and served to help develop rapport between the participant and me. Patton (2015) indicated that building rapport with the participant is critical in obtaining the best data. Questions 3–10 assisted me in gathering data on how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent within the constructs of the SDT.

Question 3 switched from ice-breaking questions to the topic of teacher support of students who were chronically absent. This question focused across all three research questions in provided an opportunity for teachers to identify how they have supported students who are chronically absent without being prompted towards specific theoretical constructs. Patton (2015) stated that a successful researcher interviews people to find out things that are not readily discernable, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, and previous behaviors. Silverman (2013) indicated that questions should tease out some theory underlying behavior. While some questions may not amount to a theory, they can provide a framework for understanding a phenomenon, which is a forerunner to a theory. Furthermore, Patton (2015) suggested that questions can be asked in a particular order. Opinions and feelings questions can be asked first while the researcher is probing to interpret experience. By asking this question first, I established the participant's knowledge and experiences with students who are chronically absent before involving the theoretical constructs of SDT.

Question 4 focused on RQ1. Concerning teacher support and student attendance, the competence construct seeks to control the outcome and experience in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By asking this question, I established the participant's knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent concerning building student competence during the participant's teaching career.

Question 5 focused on RQ1. Teachers must decide how to best utilize their engagement hours with students, a problem that becomes overwhelming when students are missing. Chronic absenteeism affects the individual student and other students in the classroom and the community (Gottfried, 2019; Zaff et al., 2017). Gottfried (2019) indicated there is a negative spillover effect on other students when chronic absenteeism occurs. Regularly attending students are at risk of falling behind due to the distractions when teachers must focus on getting the absent students caught back up on assignments.

Teachers spend more than 1,200 hours with their students in a typical teaching year (Lewis & Taie, 2021). In addition to these significant time investments, roughly half a million U.S. teachers either move or leave the profession each year (Tran & Smith, 2020). Turnover in the field is exceptionally high among new teachers, with over 40%–50% of teachers leaving the profession after 5 years (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). This attrition is not surprising in that teachers often are expected to work 55–60 hours weekly in a role that drains one's emotional, mental, and even physical levels (Lewis & Taie, 2021). This question was designed to discover how each teacher viewed their investments in supporting and building students' competence.

Question 6 was an additional topic of teacher support of students who were chronically absent. This question focused on RQ2. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that SDT's autonomy construct attempts to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life but not to the exclusion

of having others involved. By asking this question, I established the participant's knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent concerning building student autonomy.

Question 7 generated responses from the participants that focused on RQ2. Probing helped discover a complete picture (Patton, 2015). In many instances, particularly concerning chronic absenteeism, influences outside the school environment are far more responsible for students not attending, creating many challenges for each student (Li & Qiu, 2018). These challenges may include not learning at a pace with their peers, a greater sense of alienation from their classmates, teachers, and schools, and more significant frequencies of negative interactions and social disengagement when returning (Ekstrom, Goertz, et al., 1986; Finn, 1989; Gottfried, 2019; Newmann, 1981). This question was vital in developing the relationship between what the student was experiencing at home and in school concerning social support and building their own autonomy. The decision of an adolescent to either become chronically absent or drop out of school in the future rather than completing the education process is primarily influenced by the amount of social support that a teacher and parent provide as perceived by the early adolescent.

Question 8 furthered the concentration on participants' experiences. This open-ended question solicited experiences focusing on RQ2. Research indicates a correlation between students who are present and their positive academic achievement, as opposed to those who are absent and their academic failure when all other variables are held constant (Caldas, 1993; Roby, 2003). Within SDT’s autonomy construct, when teachers are supportive and interact with youths, the likelihood of failure is reduced (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Question 9 concentrated on RQ3. This question required a relatively high degree of vulnerability because it is self-reflective, and for this reason, I chose to ask it at the end. By this time in the interview, a good rapport had been established (Patton, 2015). In one study, Roby

(2003) found a significant relationship between student attendance and academic achievement in various grade levels amongst pupils in Ohio. In this study, Roby also found a strong correlation that suggested presence directly influences accomplishment. Furthermore, other research has concluded that student attendance was constructive, necessary, and directly correlated to student academic performance (Allen et al., 2018; Caldas, 1993; Leggett & Harrington, 2021). Given these findings, this question was essential to determine how teachers view their roles and professional duty in supporting and addressing students who are chronically absent. Within the SDT construct of relatedness, when teachers relate, support, and empathize during interactions with youths, the likelihood of school failure and delinquency is reduced (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, the social support that an early adolescent receives from a teacher is the strongest predictor of an early adolescent's propensity to disengage in education (Fredricks et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Question 10 was an additional topic of teacher support of students who are chronically absent. This question focused on RQ3. Relatedness explains the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By asking this question, I established the participant's knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent concerning building student competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Question 11 focused on RQ3. Probing helped discover a complete picture (Patton, 2015). While other questions attempted to gather data on how teachers sought to build competence, autonomy, and relatedness, this question was presented to discover hindrances and barriers to those efforts. When students, particularly those of low income and of color, are absent from school, regardless of the reason for the absences, it presents significant barriers to equitable and effective instruction, undermines stable learning environments, and inhibits students' success

(Davis et al., 2019). Policy, resources, and program considerations need to be explored to respond to the early adolescent to assure healthy development through intervention programs within the school setting. These programs would allow for the interaction between a significant adult and an early adolescent. This commitment requires the role of a teacher to be redefined. Presently, the role of the teacher in America, in general, is overburdened and unable to increase responsibilities without compromising effectiveness within the classroom (Kuok & Lam, 2018).

Question 12 generated responses from the participants that span across all three research questions. Chronic absenteeism is not a one-size-fits-all problem. Addressing chronic absenteeism requires teacher support and commitment to level the students' challenges to the fullest extent possible. Some schools have experienced success with focused efforts, while other steps have been less fruitful. For example, in the District of Columbia, teachers have assisted in implementing several promising strategies to improve student attendance. Across the city, a pilot shuttle service takes homeless students to and from school, teachers in more than 60 schools are visiting families at home to build stronger relationships, and the District of Columbia Public Schools are sending home thousands of letters and emails about students' attendance records, based on approaches that have produced impressive results elsewhere (Dubay & Holla, 2016). Conversely, programs that instituted harsh penalties for students and their parents have had mixed results (Monaham et al., 2014). Question 12 brought descriptions that can be used crafting future policies and initiatives.

Question 13 was a one-shot question designed to give the participant one further opportunity to offer valuable insight (Patton, 2015). This one-shot question also served as the closing question, giving the participant freedom to add to what had already been said, keeping them in the role of expert on their own life and story. Before concluding the interview, this

question offered one last attempt for the participant to provide information and to remind them on the impending focus group and writing prompt. I completed each interview with asking the participant if they have any questions, reminded them if they knew anyone who might qualify and want to join the research to let me know, and thanked them for their time (Creswell, 2013).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

I recorded each interview discussion on a multi-password-protected laptop and voice-activated recorder (Kaiser, 2009; Patton, 2015). Additionally, I transcribed each interview through a transcription service that captured data verbatim for data analysis. Once I received the transcripts and individually compared them to the recording, editing as needed, I provided a copy to each participant and asked them to review their interview transcription to check for accuracy. This process was conducted by emailing them a copy of their transcript and asking them to reply to confirm the transcription as true and accurate. After I received the member checked interview transcripts, I began analyzing the data using phenomenological reduction including horizonalization as described by Moustakas (1994). This required me to first identify the significant statements or key words from each participant's interview transcript. Then, I reviewed all of the interview data as a whole. During this step I reduced the data by deleting the overlapping and repeated significant statements or key words, clustering the horizons to derive the preliminary codes that emerged from the interview data.

Focus Groups

Once I completed all the individual interviews, I conducted four online focus groups using Microsoft Teams. Focus groups are ideal for obtaining in-depth feedback regarding participants' attitudes, opinions, perceptions, motivations, and behaviors (Krueger & Casey,

2015). I conducted focus groups to generate information on collective views, the meanings behind those views, and capture the teacher participant experiences and beliefs.

Krueger and Casey (2015) indicated that while in the focus group setting, the researcher is less directive, allowing the conversation and the ideas to emerge from the group itself. This emergent discussion helps participants identify similarities and differences on a given topic and helps the researcher identify the most critical issues and themes related to the problem (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Sequencing this event after the interviews have been transcribed and analyzed allowed me to clarify data gathered from the initial discussions and refine questions needed to enrich the research data.

In organizing the focus groups utilizing Microsoft Teams, I provided the volunteer participants several proposed times and dates, meeting room weblinks, and general administrative instructions for participating, including how Microsoft Teams works, testing the venue in advance with protocols of various online functions. Online focus groups are not a different type of focus group discussion, but one borne out of the introduction of the internet as an adaptation of traditional methods (Nyumba et al., 2018). Online focus groups boast an impression of dynamism, modernity, and competitiveness that transcends classic problems with face-to-face focus group discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). To ensure confidentiality, only invited participants had access by a passcode to the venue. In the end, through their ranked order time and date selections, I scheduled four separate focus groups amongst the 12 participants. Like the initial interviews, I recorded the focus group discussion on a multi-password-protected laptop and voice-activated recorder and transcribed the discussion verbatim using a transcribing service. The focus group protocol, or interview guide, used for each focus group included the following questions (see Appendix I):

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us all a little about your experiences in working with students who are chronically absent. (Icebreaker)
2. You may recall during our individual interview that you described your knowledge and interactions with students who are chronically absent in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness in students during your teaching career. Describe any students who are chronically absent who stand out in your memory, the circumstances surrounding them, and what support *you* may have provided. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
3. Describe any opinions *you* have formed of students who are chronically absent concerning their competence, or their skills to control the outcomes and experiences in their life. (RQ1)

    Probe – Describe any recollections where you saw significant changes in attitude, motivation, and performance as *you focused on building their competence*. (RQ1)
4. In thinking about your individual interview and the descriptions and explanations regarding *your* responsibility in building autonomy, describe any resources that you have found to be beneficial for building autonomy amongst students who are chronically absent. (RQ2)

    Probe – Describe how other teachers share information or advice concerning their experiences building personal autonomy with students who are chronically absent at your school. (RQ2)
5. In thinking about your interactions with *parents or guardians* of students who are chronically absent, describe how the relationship between you and the parents impacts *your ability* in building relatedness. In answering, explain how communication between

yourself and parents or guardians concerning relatedness occurs. (RQ3)

Probe – Describe how parents or guardians receive any advice *you provide* in supporting relatedness. (RQ3)

Probe – Describe how any changes in the student's attitude and performance may have resulted from discussing building relatedness with their parents or guardians from your support suggestions. (RQ3)

Probe – Explain how these types of interactions and experiences with parents help or hinder *your attitude* in supporting the relatedness amongst students who are chronically absent. (RQ3)

6. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. Is there anything else you would like to share with the group that you think would be essential for me to know about your view of addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

I appreciate the time you have given to this research study thus far, and I have one more task that I would like you to complete over the next week. Tomorrow, I will email each of you a two-question writing prompt. Please email back your answers to me within 1 week. This final data collection method will conclude the research gathering methods and enrich the data I have already gathered through your interview and today's focus group. I encourage each of you to provide as much detail in your answers as you can formulate. Once I have received your replies, I will mail your Amazon gift card to the address you provide. Are there any questions before we conclude?

Questions 1 was an icebreaker question that prompted the teachers to talk about themselves and become comfortable with the interview arrangement (Creswell, 2013). This

question was designed to be relatively straightforward and non-threatening and helped develop rapport between the participants and me (Patton, 2015).

Question 2 switched from icebreaking opportunities to the topic of chronic absenteeism. Question 2 supported me in gathering data across all three research questions. By asking this question, I was able to further collect data concerning the participant's knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent concerning building student competence, autonomy, and relatedness during their teaching career by focusing on one specific student rather than generalizations. Using this question across all three constructs allowed each participant to recall specific instances amongst memorable chronically absent students without limiting the discussion to one construct. This question provided data on which construct was most memorable amongst the group.

Question 3 and its follow-up probe provided further data concerning participants' experiences. These open-ended questions solicited ideas and focused on RQ1. Probing helped discover a complete picture (Patton, 2015). Bias against students who are chronically absent needs requires consideration for this study. Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes, reactions, stereotypes, and categories that affect behavior and understanding. In education, implicit bias often refers to unconscious racial or socioeconomic bias towards students, which is as frequent as explicit bias (Boysen & Vogel, 2009). By asking these questions, I gathered data concerning any opinions or stereotypes formed, as well as any observed changes to those opinions when they supported building student competence and how those opinions may have changed when they witnessed changes amongst their students.

Question 4 and its follow-up probe furthered the data for participants' experiences and focused on RQ2. Probing helped discover a complete picture (Patton, 2015). Reducing student

absenteeism and truancy is a goal of many schools across the country. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) indicated that little research focuses on what schools can do to increase and sustain students' daily attendance, and even fewer studies explore how family–school–community partnerships may contribute to this goal. Childs and Grooms (2018) indicated that more communities around the United States have been intentional in improving student attendance and limiting the impact of chronic absenteeism. By asking these questions, the participants enriched the research data and provided an opportunity for teachers to discuss any resources or policies available to them in their community and amongst themselves that were focused on improving school attendance.

Question 5 and its follow-up probes furthered the data for participants' experiences and focused on RQ3. Teachers building student relatedness are uniquely positioned to have interactions with students, their parents, and school officials in coordinating policy that endeavors to increase school attendance. Research has indicated that parents of students who are chronically absent often believe that their child's attendance is comparable to other students in their class (Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2018). Additional research indicates that informing parents about their student's attendance can reduce absenteeism and improve attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2017; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018). Asking this question and its follow-up probes enriched the research data and provided an opportunity for teachers to discuss their experiences in not only communicating with parents of students who are chronically absent but any results those communications had on improving the situation.

Question 6 was a one-shot question designed to give the participant one further opportunity to offer valuable insight (Patton, 2015). This one-shot question also served as the

closing question, giving the participants freedom to add to what had already been said, keeping them in their role of expert on their own life and story. I concluded the focus group interview by offering one last opportunity for the participants to provide information and thanked them for their time (Creswell, 2013).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I recorded each focus group interview discussion on a multi-password-protected laptop and voice-activated recorder (Kaiser, 2009; Patton, 2015). Additionally, I transcribed each focus group interview through a transcription service that captured data verbatim for data analysis. Once I received the transcripts and individually compared them to the recording, editing as needed, I provided a copy to each participant and asked them to review the focus group interview transcription to check for accuracy. This process was conducted by emailing them a copy of the focus group transcript and asking them to reply to confirm the transcription was true and accurate. After I received the member checked focus group interview transcripts, I analyzed and synthesized the information following the same processes used when I examined the individual interview data to identify all significant statements or codes present during the focus group interactions.

Writing Prompt

The final method of data gathering occurred through an emailed writing prompt. Upon completing the 12 individual semi-structured interviews and four focus groups, I used an emailed open-ended writing prompt as the final data gathering method. I sent the writing prompt to each participant the day after their focus group concluded with instructions to return their formulated responses to me within 1 week to gather additional data and complete full triangulation.

Responses to open-ended questions are often used in qualitative research methods and exploratory studies (Creswell, 2019). Van Manen (1990) indicated that formally written responses are a rich source of data collection. This third method ensured that I had captured the entire meaning of the phenomenon and brought voice to each teacher's experience supporting and addressing students who are chronically absent while being responsible for their student's academic success (Creswell, 2019; Patton, 2015; Van Manen, 2014). Qualitative studies that utilize open-ended questions allow researchers to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the studied issues. Because open-ended responses permit respondents to provide more significant consideration, this method gave the data more diversity than possible with a closed-question or forced-choice survey measure (Allen, 2017; Creswell, 2019; Patton, 2015). Answering a writing prompt allowed the participant an opportunity to have more time to think in answering than the individual interview or focus group and was sequenced last to conclude participation and allow each teacher time to reflect before answering. Participants were asked to provide their responses to the two questions within 1 week. The two questions for the writing prompt were as follows (see Appendix J):

Writing Prompt Questions

1. Reflecting on the various questions and your answers during our face-to-face interview and focus group, describe and evaluate yourself, your school, and your community in supporting students who are chronically absent in terms of building student competence, or their ability to control the outcome of their life. In answering this question, explain what you see as effective policies, procedures, and resources, as well as what you consider ineffective. (RQ1, RQ3)

2. Reflecting on your participation in this research study, describe what you think would make it possible to substantially improve student autonomy and relatedness to reduce chronic absenteeism at your school. In answering this question, describe and provide examples of how your opinion was formed. (RQ2)

Questions 1 and 2 are culminating questions linked to all three research questions, the problem statement, the purpose of the research, and all three SDT constructs. Once I received the participant's answers, I concluded the data gathering process by sending each participant a thank you letter and informing them that their participation in the study had ended (see Appendix K).

Writing Prompt Data Analysis Plan

Once I had received the answers to the writing prompt, I analyzed and synthesized the information following the same processes used when I analyzed both the individual interview and the focus group transcripts; I identified all significant statements or codes present amongst the writing prompt answers.

Data Synthesis

After completing all data collection methods and analyzing the data from each data set, I synthesized the information using core processes, which ultimately resulted in a synthesis of experiences amongst the participants. Moustakas (1994) described these processes as phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meaning. During this evolution, data were categorized into various codes through grouping and clusters, reduction, identification of the invariant constituents, constructed individual textual descriptions and personal narratives, and composite explanations of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). I examined these codes from the progression of horizonalization developed for each dataset and again completed

the process to eliminate the repeated codes across all datasets and produced the final codes and sub-codes. Each step in the data analysis process is explained in further detail below.

Phenomenological Reduction

The phenomenological reduction began with the transcribed and organized data collected from the individual interviews, focus group, and writing prompt in sequential order. Once each data gathering method concluded and textual data become available through transcription, I member checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Afterward, I engaged in bracketing, horizonalization, deletion of overlapping statements, thematic clustering of horizons, and finally organizing horizons and thematic clusters into textual descriptions of the identified phenomenon discovering the phenomenon's meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing. The first step in phenomenological reduction is bracketing. Bracketing within phenomenological reduction is the process of data analysis in which the researcher sets aside, as far as is humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to understand the participants' experiences in the study (Moustakas, 1994). To fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, researchers must bracket out their own experiences as much as possible (Creswell, 2019). To this end, I expended the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue to bracket out my experiences of being chronically absent during my high school years and any other bias I had and focused exclusively on the participating teachers of the study. Moustakas (1994) indicated that some entities are not "bracket-able." However, I approached this research with the dedication and determination required to produce the purest data. Moustakas (1994) indicated that when practiced wisely, realistically, and with the decision to let go of one’s prejudices, the actual nature and meaning of things are disclosed more fully. Throughout the

research process, I maintained a reflexive journal detailing the bracketing process as it occurred (see Appendix L).

Horizonalization. The next step in phenomenological reduction that I followed is horizonalizing. Moustakas (1994) indicated that horizonalization is the process in which specific statements are identified in the transcripts that provide information about the participants' experiences. These significant statements or key words were gleaned from the transcripts and placed in a table so that I could identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By horizonalizing narratives, then identifying the meanings from the words through developing textural and structural descriptions, I was able to cluster the data into codes and organize the pieces into coherent explanations creating an understanding of the phenomenon's meaning for interpreted results.

Thematic Clustering. Following horizonalization, I began thematic clustering. Moustakas (1994) indicated that every significant statement is initially treated as possessing equal value. However, during thematic clustering, I deleted those statements irrelevant to the topic and others that repeated or overlapped. The remaining statements then became the horizons or textural meanings. I carefully examined the identified significant statements, then clustered the statements into themes or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). By clustering horizons into codes and organizing the horizons and pieces into coherent descriptions of the themes, I created a clear understanding of the phenomenon's meaning.

Textural Clustering. The final part of the phenomenological reduction was completing a textural description of the experiences. I described *what* was experienced in textural descriptions and *how* it was experienced in structural descriptions from the thematic analysis. After textural descriptions were considered and additional meanings sought from different perspectives, roles,

and functions through the data synthesis process, I developed various types of data grouping and clusters. I then completed reduction, identification of the invariant constituents, and constructed individual textual descriptions of the themes and personal narratives as well as composite explanations of their meaning.

Imaginative Variation

Moustakas (1994) described the task of imaginative variation as seeking possible meanings through the utilization of imagination to vary the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives including different positions, roles, or functions. This variation explains how the experience of the phenomenon came to be what it is. Describing the essential structures of a phenomenon is the central task of imaginative variation.

Moustakas (1994) indicated that the world disappears within imaginative variation; existence no longer is central, anything becomes possible. Husserl (1931) emphasizes that "Pure essential truths do not make the major processes slightest assertion concerning facts; hence, from them alone, we cannot infer even the pettiest truth concerning the fact-world" (p.57) In accomplishing imaginative variation, I remained open to following the data in its purest form and not guiding it by a biased conclusion. Upon completion of imaginative variation, synthesis of the data led me to the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions, which led to a unified statement of the meaning of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

Synthesis

Upon completing the phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation processes, I synthesized the resulting meanings into findings and conclusions. The textual and structural

descriptions of the experiences became synthesized into a composite description of the phenomenon through the research process Moustakas (1994) referred to as "intuitive integration" (p. 100). This description became the essential, invariant structure of ultimate meaning, which captured the meaning ascribed to the experience. The resulting synthesis brought answers to the study's three research questions.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is necessary because it measures things that numbers might not be able to define. Since qualitative researchers do not use instruments with established metrics of validity and reliability, it is pertinent to address how qualitative researchers develop the research study's trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (1989) indicated that a researcher must commit to internal and external validation, reliability, and objectivity to establish trustworthiness. As a research study investigating how teachers in the southeastern United States address and support students who are chronically absent, I utilized four strategies to ensure trustworthiness. These four strategies were (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1989) claimed that the credibility of a study is determined when co-researchers or readers recognize their experience when they are confronted with it. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested several techniques to address credibility including activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and researcher triangulation. Credibility can also be operationalized through the process of member checking to test the findings and interpretations with the participants. The ultimate goal is to make credible

sense of the situation; anything that allows us to deepen our understanding using multiple data sources is advantageous (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Korstjens and Moser (2018) indicated that credibility establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and correctly interpret the participants' actual views. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that credibility is eventually achieved by determining if the process of collecting the qualitative data was sound, the analyses of the information were coherent, and the interpretations based on the data were fair (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is seen as the most critical aspect or criterion in establishing trustworthiness and has the most techniques available to verify it, compared to the other three factors (Creswell, 2013, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The three techniques I used to establish credibility were (a) triangulation, (b) member checks, and (c) prolonged engagement.

In triangulation, researchers use multiple and different sources, methods, instruments, and possible theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective. Creswell (2013) indicated that triangulation asks the same research questions of other study participants and collects data from different sources to answer the same questions. When researchers use multiple sources and methods to corroborate evidence for validating their study's accuracy, triangulation occurs (Creswell, 2019). Using various techniques with an individual semi-structured interview, a focus group, and an emailed open-ended writing prompt in different settings helped me achieve triangulation (Creswell, 2019; Patton, 2015). The second technique to ensure credibility was member checks.

Member checks occur when researchers ask participants to review the data collected by interviewers and the researchers' interpretations of that data (Creswell, 2013). This technique is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the "most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p.214). To achieve credibility using this technique, I transcribed each individual interview and the focus group through a transcription service to capture data verbatim for analysis. Once I had received the transcripts, I compared the completed transcript with the recording and made any edits as needed. Once I was confident that I had produced the most accurate transcript, I asked each participant to review their interview and the focus group transcriptions to check for accuracy. This process was conducted by emailing them a copy of their transcript and asking them to reply to confirm the transcription as true and accurate. Furthermore, I will share all findings of this research with the participants once the study is completed as a second form of member checking. Trust is an essential aspect of the member check process (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2015). Utilizing this technique brings further credibility to the study and findings (Creswell, 2013). The final important step in establishing credibility was conducted through prolonged engagement.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described prolonged engagement as spending sufficient time in the field to learn or understand the culture, social setting, or phenomenon of interest. Research conclusions are more credible if they result from repeated observations suggesting the same findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement is the investment of sufficient time in the research setting, learning the culture, identifying the codes and themes through discussions that are most relevant to the phenomenon, and building trust and rapport with the participants. As a researcher, I spent, on average, over 2 hours with each of the 12 research participants performing the interviews and focus groups. Further, I had many emails and phone calls with the

teachers in scheduling their participation and answering questions; all chose to conduct their interviews virtually. Finally, I traveled to Alabama to ensure I was available to coordinate any schedule changes should they arise. As a researcher gathering data by speaking with a range of people through individual interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt, I saturated the critical categories of how teachers support chronically absent students while caring for the trust of each participant to obtain valuable and rich data.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability as showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts. In their explanation of transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also explained that thick description is the primary way to achieve this concept in qualitative research. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, one begins to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that with such a detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and determine whether the findings are able to be transferred because of shared characteristics. A thick description means that the researcher provides details when describing a case or writing about a theme. According to Stake (2010), "A description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details" (p. 49). Details emerge through physical description, movement description, and activity description. Information also involves describing the general ideas to the narrow, interconnecting the elements, using strong action verbs and quotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In achieving transferability for this research study, I employed three techniques. These techniques were (a) an audit trail, (b) various demographic participants, and (c) thick descriptions.

An audit trail is when a qualitative researcher details the data collection process, data analysis, and interpretation of the data. I maintained an audit trail (Appendix M) to ensure confirmability by detailing what and why I performed certain tasks with the specific aim of improving the reliability of the research as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that an audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from starting a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These are records that are kept regarding what was done in an investigation. Within this document, I recorded what topics were unique and exciting during the data collection, wrote down significant events, and maintained a timeline of how the research, analysis, and conclusions were advanced. In addition to maintaining an audit trail, I also sought various demographics of the participants and provided thick descriptions of as a way of achieving external validity.

I solicited participant responses to the data gathering techniques from a potential pool of elementary school teachers teaching in the southeastern United States who have experience chronically absent students. Gender, ethnicity, and race were not disqualifiers for this phenomenological study; however, I made every effort to include diverse participants by opening the research to all qualified volunteers. As a researcher, I desired the maximum diversity variance among general and specific characteristics (Creswell, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). In this way, I increased the transferability of the findings to other populations. The general direction of this focus was to examine the meaning or structure of experiences in how it occurs within a participant's conscience (Tuffour, 2017). While completing this research study, I used detailed, thick descriptions of experiences using quotes and testimony from the participants. Employing both these techniques, I achieved transferability.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described dependability as showing that the findings are consistent and repeatable. An inquiry must demonstrate with evidence that if the research were replicated with the same or similar respondents [participants] in the same [or an equivalent] context, the findings would be the same. For this research study, dependability was achieved through a peer review.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained peer review as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling analytical sessions and exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). Peer reviews allow a qualified peer researcher to review and assess transcripts, evaluate emerging and final categories from those transcripts, and gauge a given study's last themes or findings (Janesick, 2015). Peer reviews require the researcher to work together with one or several colleagues who hold impartial study views. The neutral peers examine the researcher's transcripts, final report, and general methodology. Afterward, feedback is provided to enhance dependability and ensure validity. To achieve dependability using this technique, I utilized two doctoral credentialed faculty members from the university where I am currently on staff and obtained feedback for validation. Each peer provided positive feedback and applauded the alignment between the research questions and the conclusions. Furthermore, their feedback provided confidence in how the data were gathered and the process used to develop the four major themes. The two peer reviews allowed for greater dependability in ensuring the research was consistent and repeatable. Using this technique further brought dependability to the study and findings (Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

Creswell (2013) indicated that the qualitative researcher establishes confirmability by setting aside the researcher's biases. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described confirmability as a degree of neutrality or how the respondents shape the study's findings, not researcher bias, motivation, or interest. Confirmability is not only concerned with the motivations of the researcher that prompted the study but also with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but derived from the data. Confirmability is often achieved by reflexivity or the process of critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher. Creswell (2013) describes reflexivity where the researchers position themselves in a qualitative research study. This explanation means that researchers convey their background, how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study. As further described by Wolcott (2010),

> Our readers have a right to know about us. And they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study. (p. 36)

Two different techniques achieved conformability for this research study. Those techniques were (a) motivation and (b) reflexivity. The personal motivations of the researcher can skew the interpretation of what the research participants said to fit a particular narrative. Reflexivity is an attitude that a qualitative researcher adopts when collecting and analyzing the data to mitigate bias and personal motivations. A qualitative researcher must look at his or her background and position to see how this influences the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that a degree of neutrality, or the extent to which the findings of a study are

shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest, is essential to ensuring confirmability. Particularly in qualitative research, the researcher's role as the primary data collection instrument necessitates identifying personal values, assumptions, and biases at the study's outset (Creswell, 2019). To achieve reflexivity, before each interview, I reminded myself to focus on the participant and think of any bias or personal motivation. As a researcher, I sought the purest data and removed any motivations or assumptions that I might have through my own experiences. Furthermore, I expended the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue to bracket out my experiences of being chronically absent during my high school years and any other bias I have and focused exclusively on the participating teachers in the study. To this end, I maintained a reflexive journal (Appendix L) with the specific aim of improving the reliability of this research by removing my biases, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Ethical Considerations

A phenomenological qualitative study that involved interaction between me, as the researcher, and teacher participants produced ethical considerations. The Liberty University IRB approved this research study (see Appendix A) before carrying out the research. The primary ethical consideration for this research was maintaining confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to school districts, each participant, and redacted from all transcripts and emails. Participants fully understood that the extent of their involvement was strictly voluntary and that they could have elected to not answer any question(s) or stop participating at any time. Each participant was required to acknowledge their consent using an online form before they were permitted to participate (see Appendix G).

I digitally recorded each interview on a multi-password-protected laptop and personal recording device (Kaiser, 2009; Patton, 2015). All electronic documents were stored on the same

laptop. No paper documents were utilized. The secured laptop and recording device will remain with me and are stored in a key-protected file cabinet when outside of my direct control. All material will be destroyed or deleted 3 years after the completion of the study.

Summary

As the researcher, I described that the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. To this end, I provided in Chapter Three several critical functions. First, I discussed the design for the study's setting and participants. I also detailed how I gathered and analyzed the data. I provided details of how I gathered each teacher's experience by method and the specific questions I asked that assisted me in discovering the meaning of the research in answering the three research questions. Each question was specifically selected and aligned with the problem statement, purpose statement, literature, and the guiding SDT. Finally, I concluded this chapter by discussing the trustworthiness in detail for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Chapter Four contains a detailed description of those who participated in the study and the dialogue resulting from the three data collection methods. Additionally, common themes and participants' descriptions are presented in alignment with the identified research questions to describe participants' lived experiences. In maintaining confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants in the study, and they are referred to as such throughout the discussion of research findings. All quotations from participants are presented in context, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to depict participants' voices more accurately. This chapter is organized into the following sections: participants, results, research question responses, and summary.

Participants

This research study included 12 elementary school teachers from two approved public school districts and proximity schools acquired through snowball sampling, located in the southeastern United States. The two approved public school districts in this study were assigned the following pseudonyms: the Herculean and Spartan school districts. I chose to focus on elementary school districts instead of middle and high school districts to explore any implications of how the support of elementary school teachers for chronically absent students might relate to future absenteeism, poor performance, dropout rates, or other concerns. Allen et al. (2014) indicated that absenteeism patterns, attitudes, behaviors, and implications begin in kindergarten and increase throughout middle and high school. Participants were initially

screened through an online questionnaire to ensure they were elementary school teachers in the southeastern United States and had experience in supporting and addressing the needs of students who were chronically absent during their teaching career. The participants represented several schools within the Herculean and Spartan school districts. In addition to these schools and districts, snowball sampling led to three elementary school teachers meeting the screening criteria from adjacent school districts. The screening survey approved by Liberty's Institutional Review Board (IRB) asked for interested individuals to indicate their gender in the hopes of procuring more diversity; however, only female elementary school teachers agreed to participate in this study. Table 1 displays the demographics of the 12 participants and the screening qualification results.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Grade Level	Years Teaching	Exp. with Chronically Absent Students
Amanda	F	Combo K–6th	11–20	Yes
Blair	F	Kindergarten	11–20	Yes
Cindy	F	3rd	> 20	Yes
Dawn	F	5th	6–10	Yes
Ellen	F	3rd	6–10	Yes
Francis	F	Combo K–6th	6–10	Yes
Gina	F	Combo K–6th	6–10	Yes
Heidi	F	4th	6–10	Yes
Irene	F	1st	6–10	Yes
Jill	F	1st	11–20	Yes
Kelly	F	5th	11–20	Yes
Lisa	F	1st	11–20	Yes

Amanda

Amanda is an elementary school and special education teacher who has been teaching various grade levels within different schools and districts for 11–20 years. As a certified psychometrist and licensed teacher, Amanda has a wealth of experience supporting and addressing students who are chronically absent within many different scenarios. Amanda enjoys teaching at the elementary level and indicated in her interview that her favorite part of being a teacher was "seeing growth, academic growth, behavioral growth, emotional growth, I think, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, and then sometimes, you know, even from year to year." She also described in her interview how money plays a role in supporting students who are chronically absent:

> I'm in a system with a lot of money; it [school district] has some deep pockets. And I say it's really very different than in a system where I worked as a psychometrist for the last three years. I loved that system. I loved my director, but they just did not have the money. So, they did not do many of these things [supporting chronically absent students]. They might send a letter to a child's parents, but it would stop there because the funds were not available to go to court, like where I am now; it just would not happen here.

Blair

Blair is teaching kindergarten this year but has taught Grades K–3 over the past 19 years in different school systems across various states. She has been in schools with very few chronically absent students and schools where it was common. Because of having many years of experience, she felt she can speak with confidence concerning how she has supported students who were chronically absent. Blair displayed a wealth of knowledge in addressing and

supporting students who are chronically absent and described in her interview her favorite part of being a teacher:

> I love seeing them grow over the year, and just coming in some with little experience in school and some with greater experience. But no matter what their background is, they come to school. And it's just, their eyes just glow. They're so excited. They're like sponges, they want to learn everything and, and pick up on everything, and not just love seeing the joy in their eyes of being here and learning and like we're the year that you see the most growth, you know, not only physically but with their, you know, letters and reading, it just takes off. So, it's just seeing that joy in their eyes.

Cindy

Cindy has taught for more years than any other participant in this study. She loves teaching elementary students at the third-grade level but has taught at different levels during her career. She has substantial experience in addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent and continues her support this year. Cindy stood out during the research by pointing out that teachers must be sympathetic towards the parents of students who are chronically absent—not just the student. Cindy indicated in her writing prompt, “I would love to see more teachers feel compassion for parents of students who miss a lot of school. Not every teacher feels like I do.” Cindy aimed her sympathetic belief toward the students as well in her writing prompt. “Some things that would be ineffective would be if a student does return and they feel ‘shamed’ or unwelcomed. If we make them feel defeated by trying to catch up. I am very lenient in makeup work.”

Dawn

Dawn is a fifth-grade teacher who loves teaching at her elementary school. She fell within the 6–10 year teaching category when answering the survey questions. She indicated during the research that she had not experienced too many students inside her district being chronically absent. However, she did discuss that this year, she has two students she has had to support who are chronically absent. Dawn discussed what she is currently facing in here writing prompt by explaining,

> For my two chronically absent students this year, one parent has been issued a summons to truancy court. Still, the other was able to have a form signed by his psychiatrist that says he should be expected to miss 2 to 3 days a month due to anxiety. His absences are put in as excused, and he has missed over sixty days this year. Getting the parents to communicate with the school is challenging in both situations.

Ellen

Ellen is a third-grade teacher who has taught students for 10 years. She indicated in her interview, "So, this is my tenth year of teaching, and this year has been by far the worst with attendance in all my years." She indicated that she was not satisfied with how the attendance policy is applied within her district in supporting students who were chronically absent. Ellen feels strongly that a holistic approach is needed and explained in her writing prompt,

> Having a school-wide improvement plan for attendance would help support chronic absenteeism. With a plan to support families struggling to get their child to school and counselor/admin support on following through. If everyone is involved and supportive, it will work.

Francis

Francis is a resource special education teacher who teaches a combination of students in Grades K–6 and has considerable experience in supporting students who were chronically absent. She, as well as many of the teachers interviewed, discussed the use of technology in supporting students who are chronically absent. During the week we interviewed, Francis recalled,

> Like, this week, for example, I had one student, and they had been absent for 4 days. And I have this program that we use—it's called School Status. It allows me to text the student and parent. I just text the parent, and I said, hi, miss you, and I just wanted to say I've missed your child. I hope they're feeling okay.

Technology use is seen throughout teachers' efforts across many areas within their classrooms. The virtual classroom and technology-based skills were frequently utilized among those interviewed due to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gina

Gina is a teacher who currently serves as a librarian at her elementary school. She works with a combination of students in Grades K–6 and has experienced many chronically absent students over the past 6–10 years of teaching within her school district. Gina indicated during her interview that her favorite part of being a schoolteacher has been "just being with and working with all the students and being with the kids"; she recalled her first day in front of students: "I was excited. I wasn't experienced. So, you know, I wasn't, I'm more comfortable in front of students than I am adults. And I was excited. I was, you know, just glad to be there."

Heidi

Heidi is a fourth-grade teacher who indicated on her survey that she has taught students between 6–10 years. Heidi contains vast knowledge in addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent and indicated in her interview that her favorite part of being a fourth-grade teacher has been the students. "My favorite part of being the teacher is the students, for sure. I enjoy meeting them and seeing their personalities and watching them grow and learn. But definitely the students." Heidi had several ideas in answering her writing prompt that she thought would improve attendance:

> The school could possibly provide additional support for the chronically absent. Maybe offer extra after-school support on the days that the student actually shows up to school. The school could provide a social worker or case worker to do a home visit and meet with the parents to see if the parent needs some kind of additional support to get the students to school on time. I believe at our school, we had title-1 funds set aside for such a position, but the position was never filled. I don't know why it was not filled. The school and the system could do a better job enforcing student attendance on the parents to hold them accountable for a student's lack of attendance.

Irene

Irene is a first-grade teacher who indicated on her screening survey that her experience as an elementary school teacher fell within the 6–10 year category. Irene stated in her interview that she has worked in two school systems, which have been entirely different concerning the support provided to chronically absent students. Irene explained,

> It's been different in both of the school systems I've been in. The first school system, it was very not structured. And there was just not really any protocol for helping students

> who weren't in the classroom. But the district I'm in now it's much more structured, especially since COVID. Especially with students who are chronically absent, it's much more structured. There's a routine that we follow. And it's just very organized so that all absent students receive high-quality instruction to ensure that there are no gaps.

Jill

Jill is one of the more experienced participants in the study and has mainly taught first-grade students. She is very proud of her school district and the support everyone provides to students, emphasizing the involvement of school counselors. Jill stated in her writing prompt,

> Our most significant resource for this [supporting students who are chronically absent] is our school counselors. They go above and beyond to help struggling children and families. As examples, they [school counselors] run a snack program for students on free and reduced lunch. They [students] receive a bag of snacks each Friday to ensure they have enough to eat over the weekends. We have a food drive at Thanksgiving and an "Angel Tree" at Christmas time for families in need at our school. We have many resources and intervention programs that can assist students in closing the gaps and holes in their learning due to absenteeism.

Kelly

Another more experienced teacher in the study was Kelly. She indicated in her screening survey that she had 11–20 years of teaching experience. She noted that in her experience, chronic student absences were due to illness. Kelly discussed in her interview, "Most of my students who have been chronically absent, has been due to an illness, or I guess it could be considered an illness, some of the things that they have struggled with [anxiety, depression, etc.]." Kelly stood out in the research as she was quick to doubt herself and her district in how they have addressed

and supported students in building the competence of students who have been chronically absent over the years. She observed in the writing prompt,

> I do not feel I have done an effective job at building competence in chronically absent children. To me, that seems to be a big missing piece. In thinking about my school, my judgment (which is very personal) is that there is not much done at all to address chronically absent students. Parents seem to be placated, and excuses that do not feel legitimate are taken. Nothing is done to support competency. Policies and practices have not been effective because parents can quickly get doctors to support why their kids do not need to be expected to be at school, and I feel like administrators believe their hands are tied in forcing the issue. Our students do not have buses available for them to get to school independent of their parents. So, parents are a significant obstacle that is hard to get around.

Lisa

Lisa, a first-grade teacher, was the final participant in the study and indicated in the screening survey that she has taught for between 11–20 years. Lisa revealed in her interview that her favorite part of being a teacher is daily engagement with kids. She also noted that over the years in supporting chronically absent students, she, as many of the participants discussed, has had to frequently repeat lessons for these students:

> In students that have been chronically absent over the years, it's a lot of repeating lessons that we've gone over previously because the class has moved on, but they've [the absent student] missed something. And then they've forgotten what they once learned or haven't retained as much of it to support what they need for the new skill or thing that we are

working on; it's a lot of one-on-one instruction and trying to catch them back up with the rest of the class.

Results

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. I collected data for this research from 12 participating elementary school teachers through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and an emailed open-ended writing prompt. I used these data sources to derive the themes and subthemes as well as seek answers to the research questions. Through this process, four major themes emerged: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. This section highlights both the themes and relevant subthemes of my findings.

Theme Development

The theme development process began after each individual interview, carried on through the four focus groups, and culminated with the return and analysis of a writing prompt. I used the steps for data analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) to find the themes and subthemes for this study. This data analysis process is explained in detail in Chapter Three under the Data Synthesis section. Upon achieving saturation, where I had discovered a shared consensus of experiences by the participants, I realized that there was an opportunity to name the themes in such a way to be memorable to education practitioners; the four C's themes emerged from the data collected: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment (see Table 2). The major themes and subthemes captured the entire essence of lived experiences of how teachers support students who are chronically absent while being held responsible for their academic success. Table 2 provides

descriptive keywords and phrases that comprise the essence of the four major themes and associated subthemes.

Table 2

Theme Development

Keywords/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Communication	
talking, contacting, meet/meetings, newsletter, guidance counselors, parents, speaking, reaching out, tell your parents, newsletter, helpline, call, notes, letter, friends, problem solving team, Connect Five team, pull together	Coordination
computers, iPhone, money, Apps, Internet, phone, cost, webpage, Zoom, platform, iPad, laptops, virtual, online, social media, email, poor, Google Meets, Google docs, Google voice, Classroom Dojo, Remind, email, phone	Technology
Major Theme 2: Connections	
rapport, bond, empathy, sympathy, relationship, together, friendship, special relationship, emotional, safety, predictable, trust, understanding, close relationship, connected, building, supportive, closeness	Teacher and Student Connection
good, bad, sympathetic, distrustful, complicated, difficult, helpful, important, vital, most important, make-or-break, cynical, helpful, supportive, tricky, challenging, friendly, flexible, valuable, understanding	Teacher and Parents/Guardians Connection
Major Theme 3: Compassion	
help, hugs, listening, sympathize, greet, compliment, value, show approval, respect, pet names [sweetie, honey, etc.], smile, attention, recognize, lift-up, affection, friendly, reliable, caring, encourage, inspire, feel, encourage, cheer, same team	Projecting Affection

Keywords/Phrases	Subthemes
routine, practice, extra time, organize, caught-up/catch-up, after school, resources, other teachers, teacher aid, flexible, regular, pair-up, tutor, record, missed-work/homework folder, routine, accommodating, open to	Making Accommodation
Major Theme 4: Commitment	
weekend, afterschool, evenings, holidays, dropped off, visited, met with, purchased, over the summer, drove/took/driving, go to see, sporting events, special events, birthdays	Outside Class Efforts
lack of transportation, no internet, parents, babysitting, single parents, sick, money, clothing, lack of food, no computer, parents will not bring them, show up late, school not important	Overcoming Barriers

Theme One: Communication

The first major theme of communication involved the importance for teachers to be able to communicate between themselves and others to support chronically absent students. This theme is not exclusive to speech; the theme also involves the orchestration of support through communication and the processes' means, challenges, and often difficulties. Teachers must consistently endeavor to emphasize to parents the importance of academics, their students, their social circle, and habits, to name a few. To achieve success in communication, the elementary school teachers in this study overwhelmingly expressed how they arrange support through others and use technology. Two subthemes emerged from the major theme of communication. These subthemes were (a) coordination and (b) technology.

Coordination. A schoolteacher's effort to coordinate support amongst various stakeholders plays a vital role in helping to promote attendance in many ways. One way is to make attendance a priority, assisting parents in understanding that coming to school, particularly

in elementary school, is vital to a child's long-term success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Another is to link chronically absent students to support services and form problem-solving teams to ensure all stakeholders are informed and involved. During her interview, when discussing how teachers share information, Heidi discussed one of her experiences in supporting a past chronically absent student:

> So, with this student, they have already been turned over to social services. We would devise a plan, and basically, we just had to document everything we had done to push the student along. I had to prove that I had done my job as the teacher to get the kid to school. So, I had to coordinate with various resources. It was really more about proving and providing data that we're doing all we can do, less going into their house and picking them up and bringing them to school. We were ensuring that we were doing all that we could do to possibly get them to school. And so that was, that was how we shared information. That was how we communicated about it. That's how we discussed it in those problem-solving team (PST) meetings.

The consensus of the elementary school teachers was that communication occurs in many ways. Coordinating these efforts includes different forms of communication between the teacher and various stakeholders and in various settings that range from face-to-face visits and meetings to leveraging technology. As Ellen mentioned in her interview,

> So, I send texts that way and call as well, to try to communicate the need to be here, and also the counselor and the administration. Also, I follow up with them [counselor and administration]. And then we'll get them here for a few days, and then they stop coming again. So, it's just that constant coordination and communication. The kids want to be

> here; it's not always on them. It's just parent support and getting the parents to get them here.

Technology. Lim et al. (2019) indicated significant problems around students not attending school despite many initiatives that include leveraging classroom technology within the public school system. Despite the positive trends toward adopting technology in the classroom, the full menu of technology is still not universally available to all students. The use of technology in supporting chronically absent students through coordinating efforts and communication was universally recognized by all participants. Within the three data gathering techniques, teachers expressed their use of leveraging various technologies across the spectrum of support practices. Some uses included various web-based platforms and web applications, individual and mass text messaging, Internet document sharing, virtual meetings, and classroom recordings and instruction. The general consensus from the elementary school teacher participants was that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology has become more prevalent within their schools. In one focus group setting, I asked the group, "Describe any students who are chronically absent, who stand out in your memory, the circumstances surrounding them, and what support you may have provided." Irene stated,

> Since COVID, students know how to learn, and you learn how to teach and do a lot of technology-type things. So, I now know I can put it [schoolwork] online for my students. And that allows them to be doing something at home if they did not finish it at school and feel like doing it at home. It is a realistic and good option for them.

Unfortunately, this study also revealed that chronically absent students might not have access to the technologies used by teachers. Cindy indicated in her interview,

> The biggest barrier is technology. If the parents aren't using technology, they're not getting my emails, I've used an app called Remind, which takes my phone number out of it, and puts in just a bogus phone number, I guess. And it just goes out to the parents. And I can send it to one or to all of them; I can text them through that without showing my own phone number. But if they're not going to read it or don't have the phone, that is a problem. Another issue is the internet. We have had students that the parents could not afford, know how to use, or chose not to have internet. That is a big problem when they're not at school, and I'm trying to work with them virtually or contact the parents. Yeah, it's hard when they don't have the internet.

Theme Two: Connections

The second major theme that emerged from the lived experiences of elementary school teachers who supported chronically absent students was the need for connections between the teachers, students, and their parents or guardians. As Blair explained in her interview how building relationships is vital in supporting students who are chronically absent:

> Building relationships between students and myself, between students, and between parents and myself is essential to supporting chronically absent students and all students. Building student relationships is done through getting to know each student on a personal level, morning meetings, games, and more.

As I interviewed teachers, I observed a consensus that indicated a need to establish relationships with their students and their parents or guardians. For students who are chronically absent, this appeared to be very important to have a predictable person for the student to count on. Cindy stated in her interview, "You know, you really try to build that rapport with the child and, you know, really trying to get that connection with the child so that they can relate to you." However,

there was also a consensus that establishing a relationship with parents is often difficult at best and impossible at worse. Dawn mentioned in her interview, “We have a bit of a parenting crisis in our country right now. . . . We've got a lot of parents who are not doing that [communicating] and not providing that [support] for their children." Two subthemes emerged from the major theme of connecting. These subthemes were (a) teacher and student connection and (b) teacher and parents or guardians' connection.

Teacher and Student Connection. The viewpoint amongst the participants in this research was that their efforts in building relationships with students who are chronically absent often bring about positive results and establish a more profound connection that benefits the student's social, emotional, and academic growth. Specifically, when the teachers discussed how they try to connect with these students, they disclosed the many different investments they make, including advice, time, love, trust, empathy, and showing their care and concern for any adversity facing the student. Teacher efforts in building relationships with their students are more likely to motivate and inspire students to attend school regularly and succeed (Gutierrez & Buckley, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). In other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges outside the classroom and for whom the school is particularly beneficial are more likely to want to come to school and improve their academic performance when they feel connected to and supported by their teachers. Teachers, therefore, become a critical nexus between providing support within many adverse circumstances and student success. As discussed in one of the focus groups, Jill focused on this support need:

> You know, I was thinking when Cindy was talking a lot about relationships and building relationships. I think that is the biggest thing that you have to do for those kids is to be their stability and to have a close relationship with them, so they will come and tell you

> things. If something is going on at home, or they're upset or just, so they really trust you. And you are their kind of stability because most of them have zero stability at home, and at least while they're with us, we can be that for them.

Francis described it this way in her writing prompt, indicating that school staff connections with students are important as well:

> An option that I think would improve student autonomy and relatedness to reduce chronic absenteeism at my school is for school staff to build strong relationships with students and parents. I believe creating positive interactions with students and parents create relatedness in schools.

Teacher and Parents or Guardians Connection. Establishing a respectful and meaningful relationship between teachers and parents or guardians is critical. Some of the teachers in this study indicated that keeping parents informed about the number of absences and their impact on their students had a positive effect on attendance. This research also revealed that teachers must consistently emphasize to parents the importance of academics, to know their students, their social circle, and habits, to name a few. By engaging parents or guardians and keeping them informed, teachers in this study disclosed that their efforts often lead to better support from home and student development, performance, and attendance. In the same spirit of connecting, empirical literature indicated that schools reported reduced absences after sending postcards that told kindergarten parents of this connection and included the number of days their child had missed (Allen et al., 2018). Maintaining open and frequent communication and relationships with parents appears helpful but also a complex requirement to achieve. In addition to being generally laborious and challenging, the teachers in this study indicated that building

relationships with English as a second language adults adds another layer of difficulty, as described by Francis in her interview:

> I have another student, and the parents speak Spanish. So, whenever one of the classrooms was exposed to COVID, that student's parents thought that he had to stay home. The whole class wasn't shut down; they got a note saying he had been close to someone who tested positive for COVID. I think the parents misunderstood and thought that he should be sitting at home. And so, I was concerned, because there's been a couple of other things and times when the parent misunderstood and so I had a lady in our office who speaks Spanish, and I said, could you just call and check on him, and make sure that he's not sick. But if he's not sick, then he can come to school. And so, sure enough, the parent had not understood the initial note and didn't understand. So, it actually happened another time as well. We have a School Status app, and it allows us to text the parents and allows me to translate them. I usually send it in English, and then I'll go back and send in whatever—Spanish or Chinese, you know, whatever, and in that way, they're pretty good at responding by text and staying connected.

Adding to the difficulty are parents or guardians who are virtually or literally missing from building a relationship with teachers. Unfortunately, not all relationships will be easy, or even possible, to create. Heidi, during her individual interview, described this challenge:

> At the elementary level, the fourth-grade level where I am, the biggest problem are the parents, not always the students, and it's harder to get a parent to do what they're supposed to do than to get a student to do what they're supposed to. So, you know, sometimes you have a student and you and the student understand that the problem is really with the parents causing them to be chronically absent. When you've done all you

> can to try to convince and conference with the parents, and they're just really missing in the children's lives; you try just to give the children a pep talk and let them know it's okay and let them know that we'll make it through together. Sometimes they are absent because they really aren't in control of their lives, and their parents, you know, were too high or drunk the night before to get them to school, or they were taken to jail. I mean, there are all these circumstances—they were up late watching their brother and sister, another big issue.

Theme Three: Compassion

The third major theme that emerged from the lived experiences of elementary school teachers who support chronically absent students was the need to ensure the students know their teachers care about them. Teacher emotional support of elementary school students is critical to keep students engaged and attending. This type of support may begin at the start of class with greetings at the door such as a handshake or hug. As Blair indicated in her interview, "First of all, I'm standing at the door to greet them, and to you know, love on all of them, I'm so glad you're here, to let them know I care, get them excited about coming in." As I interviewed each teacher and observed as they interacted in the focus groups, I noticed how they expressed their love for their students and how affectionate they were when they spoke about their work. Through their language and passionate tone, I observed that they care deeply for their students and want them to succeed. They expressed anguish when their students were absent when the students want to be at school but cannot attend for various reasons outside their young ability to control. When teachers spoke about students who are chronically absent, they appeared vastly more compassionate than judgmental and shared how they worked at getting the students caught

up with their peers. Two subthemes emerged from the major them of compassion. These subthemes were (a) projecting affection and (b) making accommodation.

Projecting Affection. For students to stay engaged and learn, the school must be a place where they feel comfortable, safe, and connected. As students navigate any number of circumstances during their educational journey, their school dynamics will play a critical role in supporting or hindering them through the learning process (Capp et al., 2021). Although multifaceted in causation, students are people. People require basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs to be met (Maslow, 1954). Positive school dynamics may entice students to attend school regularly and continue to gain importance in the educational profession as a mechanism to support student success.

As I gathered data, the consensus among teachers was that a positive school environment was conducive to learning. Teachers indicated that they achieve a positive environment by showing students love and affection, which has been helpful for them in producing numerous positive student outcomes. One example provided by Amanda in her writing prompt described showing affection for chronically absent students in this way:

> Creating a positive culture, climate, and sense of community is critical to improving student autonomy and relatedness to reduce chronic absenteeism. Our school uses a conscious discipline program to help do this, but I'm sure there are others out there.

One of the other teachers during focus group interview mentioned "Morning Meeting" and how she greets students at the door and wishes them well when they leave:

> In our morning meetings using conscious discipline, every class will say, "We wish you well," with hands over their hearts and then bring them to a sweeping open position to any absent student and write his/her name on the board. It's designed to reduce behavior

> issues, but they do that by making kids feel like they belong, have control and power over their behavior and decisions, and that they are important—the same things that make kids want to come to school.

When asked to describe any investments or support in or outside the school she provides to students who are chronically absent that builds a student's competence, Cindy indicated during her interview:

> Okay, one thing, one of my gifts, I guess, is encouragement; I love to encourage the kids and let them know, hey, you can do this; I'm on your side, I'm on your team. I am your advocate. Hey, we've really missed you; try to encourage them so that they will want to come to school, especially those reluctant learners who might not want to always be at school because it's hard for them. But just to let them know, hey, look, you are part of our team, you're part of our class, you're part of our learning community, we love you and really want you here. They need somebody to love them; they need to show love; some of them need it, basically, because school is the only place they get it. There are still children whose parents don't feed them. Our school eventually implemented a weekend backpack program in which we send ready-to-eat food. It's not a complete weekend's worth of food, but it's plenty to at least get them by. They can microwave a package of macaroni and cheese. And they can learn to do things like that for themselves, which is too bad that we have situations like that.

Environmental support efforts for students range from teacher and staff attitudes to the physical structure and accommodation of the school building. Often overlooked school support efforts may include everything from how teachers greet students, view inclusiveness, and mood. Regardless of the specifics, research has indicated that the quality of these school and teacher

practices can directly affect children's behavior and cognitive, social, and emotional development (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020).

Making Accommodation. Risk factors and situations that lead to chronic absenteeism weaken a child's engagement in education. The presence of multiple risk factors significantly increases the risk of absences. Even excused absences, such as illnesses, may cause the child to fall behind academically and lose connections with peers and supportive school personnel (Allen et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2008; Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). Missing a few days a year for illness or travel is inevitable; however, educational leaders and teachers must endeavor to recognize at-risk students early on in the year as these students are likely to need greater individualized accommodation and support.

Accommodation and support of returning students who are chronically absent often include a focus on both the social and academic needs of the individual. As described by Heidi in her interview, "Accommodations would probably be the biggest, the biggest support that we would give our kids in our school system." Along these lines, teachers described many different efforts across the data gathering techniques. In one example, Cindy described her experiences with accommodating students who are chronically absent when answering her writing prompt:

> I have a big heart for others, especially ones who can't help themselves. I genuinely feel for students and their families when "life" happens, and they struggle to cope. I am very compassionate and want to help all that I can. My main goal is to get students to attend school so that I can help them better. One time I mailed the child a Bruster's ice cream gift card with a note telling the child that I missed them, along with my phone number. The mother did call back to thank me and began to "unload" about their family situation. Also, before they return, I talk to my students and plan a welcome back to school activity,

> so the absent child feels welcome and comfortable. This is the first thing I always do. I will talk to a few students to try and sit with them at lunch, play with them at recess, and help them feel missed and included. Academically, I pull the child aside and review the pertinent topics/content they need to know. Sometimes, I need the help of our interventionist with this. Each case is different, but the best resources that are helpful sometimes are the student's classmates. They can really have a positive effect on making a classmate feel comfortable to be back. This can really help a child to want to keep coming and convince their parents to let them come to school in a structured environment.

Kelly, during her interview, when asked to describe any investments or support in or outside of school that she provides to students who are chronically absent in terms of time, accommodation, emotional support, or any other types of support, answered in this way:

> I have a student now who has been chronically absent, and, I mean, I have to completely recreate packets of things to go along with what so many of the things that we do are hands-on. So then try to find something that will work that she can do at home. I mean, I have to get advice from colleagues; what do you have for this one, this or that, that I could send to the student? Some chronically absent students ask me to meet with them after school or before school. But now, as far as planning periods, I probably spend about one planning period a week gathering materials for one chronically absent student.

Theme Four: Commitment

The fourth major theme that emerged from the lived experiences of elementary school teachers who supported chronically absent students was the need for teachers to be committed to the teaching profession and their students. This commitment presents many forms and absorbs a

diverse menu of resources. In interacting with the teachers involved in the study, all teachers indicated that they are inherently nurturing individuals; almost all participants mentioned that they were mothers. The way they spoke concerning their chronically absent students was clearly as if the student were their child. Although they all expressed frustration and disappointment when describing their experiences with parents or guardians of students who were chronically absent, only one teacher had anything negative to say about any particular student. Even in that instance, she indicated that the child acts differently at school than when their parent is around, thus pushing the concern back to parenting skills rather than the child's ability or desire to attend and remain at school. Teachers with chronically absent students expressed how often they must engage with students and parents or guardians outside of regular school hours and be the nexus of helping students when impediments prevent them from regular attendance. Two subthemes emerged from the major theme of commitment. These subthemes were (a) outside class efforts and (b) overcoming barriers.

Outside Class Efforts. Teachers experience challenges both in and out of school in addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent. Support for students who are chronically absent does not begin or end at the sounding of the morning or afternoon bell. Inside the school, teachers must get students to maintain continuity with other students when some are missing, get absent students caught up on course material missed during their absence, and maintain an environment that promotes social and emotional growth (Gottfried, 2017). Outside of school, many contributing factors appear difficult or impossible for educators to combat alone. With such complexity and many often-competing variables, teachers' personal investment with students who are chronically absent, particularly amongst minorities, economically disadvantaged, and other at-risk student populations within the community, was shown to be

essential throughout this study. Teachers indicated that they often engage in activities outside the typical teaching day. Both Blair and Irene described how important it is to keep the lines of communication open when students are absent, which typically occurs after school or in the evening. Blair, in her focus group, described her support in this way:

> I'll try to do Zoom meetings with them after school, or I take work to their house and then pick it back up. I try to get them still doing stuff at home. But I have found that a lot of the parents whose kids are at home, they're the ones that weren't doing any homework to start with. So, it's still just that gap that we have to close. Also, our school is great about reaching out, helping, and trying to help me so that it's not always me doing the calling and checking. They also call: “Hey, you know, we're looking for you, where are you, we need you at school.” I would say all the way from Admin down; somebody is always reaching out to check on them during and after school. Um, if they're hearing it from everybody, you know—“We miss you at school, we're ready for you to be back at school, what can we do?”—it just changes everything.

Irene, in her individual interview, echoed this sentiment:

> Well, the school provides internet access, so we've got that. I mean, I'll reach out to the parents and make sure the child's doing okay. Depending on the reason, if it's a situation where I can visit them, I will. Also, I've gone to soccer games before, met them at the park, and attended their different sporting events, just to let them know that emotionally, I'm there to support them. I think really just keeping the lines of communication open and letting them know that they're not just my student that they're my kids, and I care for them and letting them know that and see that is very important.

Ellen, in her interview, described a current student and other reasons why students may be absent, and how through her commitment, she supports them outside of school:

> So, one of mine that's absent a lot, I have gone to Old Navy and purchased her clothes because sometimes I feel like that's one of the reasons she's not here is because she doesn't have clothes that she can wear to school. After all, she's growing fast and, you know, beginning to get taller. So, that's something that I've done. With all of them, I'm also often sending messages on the weekends just to remind them, hey, you know, school Monday; I hope to see everybody on Monday. I need everybody here; it's super important to be here. And if you're here early, you'll get a special ticket. So, we'll do a special ticket drawing. Just motivating them to be here and on time. Additionally, I have worked with local churches to provide additional snacks and stuff to use to motivate them as well to get them here and to get clothes for some of those that don't have clothes. Because of the grade level I teach, you want to fit in, you want to have the clothes that everybody has, and you don't want to be looked at differently. They [the students] don't tell you that's the reason they're not coming, but I think it often is. So, if I can fix that part, then I would, and I will always try.

Overcoming Barriers. Elementary students are not unlike any school-age student in that regular school attendance may become disrupted by uncontrollable life circumstances. However, there is a difference in capability because elementary students typically rely on the adults in their life to make decisions for them and fully assist them in their educational endeavors. Life circumstances may include a diverse list of obstacles such as food insecurity or hunger, parental substance abuse, unstable housing arrangements, unreliable transportation, job loss within the family, lack of health insurance, and many others, all contributing to chronic absenteeism (Allen

et al., 2018). Teachers must cultivate support within their activities to bridge the gap between impediments many students face in attending school and acquiring the basic skills to progress. During Dawn's interview, she described two students who are currently facing obstacles:

> Okay, so both of these kids are in my homeroom; it's a homeroom, math, science, and social studies. I know, for one of them, the parent is the issue getting them to school. The other one, I think their parent has some mental illness that keeps them from coming to school. And so, for neither kid it's really their fault, necessarily. It is fifth grade. Now, do they probably enjoy not coming to school? Sure. But also, they realize that they're getting behind. I mean, one has been absent 47 days today; the other is 24 days this year. As far as supporting them, they're not getting anything done at home. So, anything that's going to be made up has to be done at school—paring down the work and what is the most important thing and getting them to do it has been the support my partner teacher and I have focused on. It's math, so it is really trying to reteach how math works. It is like here is how we do it, explore it, learn it, practice it, test it, and if you miss something, you've missed a lot. And so that's a challenge. So, really just trying to catch them up as best we can.

Ellen also discussed in her interview an experience in a past school system when teachers had to step in to overcome the obstacle in getting the student to class:

> I feel like we start making progress, and then they're out again, which falls on the parents and, you know, getting the parents to get them here and motivating him [the student] to be here. I feel the school system should do more to get these kids here. I feel like that is a big bump in the road. I taught in another district where the counselor and I would sometimes go and pick up the child, and I feel like if that were an option, sometimes it

> would help get them here because that seems to be an issue. Sometimes it's just the ability to be here.

Across the research gathering techniques, the general sentiment of the teachers was summed up in Gina's comments in her interview\:

> Well, time is always a barrier, and, you know, teachers feel spread very thin. You know, by the time you address all the needs, it's hard to find the time to do the makeup stuff, then do the extra work and trying to make the extra effort. When the students are out sometimes, it's just, it's just difficult to make it like it needs to be.

Research Question Responses

Three research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study to explore the experiences of public school teachers who supported chronically absent students at the elementary school level. The teacher participants described their experiences in supporting students who are chronically absent while being responsible for their educational success—viewpoints among the participants aligned with four major themes: communication, connection, compassion, and commitment. The individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompt responded to the research questions.

Research Question One

Research Question One asked, "How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the competence of elementary school students who are chronically absent?" Within the study, teachers explained how they build competence, or the skills needed to control the outcome and experience in one's life, of elementary school students who were chronically absent. In Blair’s writing prompt, she stated that building self-esteem is equally essential to building competence: "I feel that building students' self-esteem helps with

chronic absences. Yes, this is extra work and hard on me as the teacher, but it can make all the difference for that student."

Another way that the participants indicated that they address and build competence in students who are chronically absent is being dedicated and leveraging technology by providing options to level impediments facing students outside their classrooms. In this way they demonstrated commitment to their student by helping them overcome barriers. As explained by Ellen in her interview,

> I tell them that if you are at home, you are usually on a phone—so, jump on [the internet] and practice—here's our classroom stuff we're doing. I let them know that these are options that you can do so you're not falling behind.

Blair indicated in her writing prompt, "Students who are chronically absent do not feel like they have control of the outcome of their own life. What they need to be taught is what they can control." In being devoted and providing options for students by leveraging technology, even when the student wants to be in school but is hindered by circumstances outside of their control, having options helps them take control and build their competence in continuing their education regardless of impediments. In doing so, the teachers demonstrate compassion and commitment to their students as they support them in navigating adversity. However, Jill explained in her interview that building competence suffers when consistency is lacking, which interferes with their ability to build teacher–student relationships. Jill stated,

> Well, again, that it's them not having that consistency. You have to offer as much as you can when they're with you because little kids thrive on consistency and having a routine. And those are the kids that don't have that; they don't have it at home. So, you have to do your best to give that to them when they're with you.

The participants of this study provided many different experiences in addressing and supporting competence in students who are chronically absent that are interconnected within the four C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. Dawn described in her interview that through her compassion and commitment, she had witnessed how addressing the competence of elementary school students who are chronically absent had produced significant change:

> I don't think in the past she [the student who was chronically absent] necessarily had those skills. I've seen a significant shift in that [her competence] from being kind of apathetic to actually working hard. So that's a considerable shift. I mean, it might change the trajectory of her life. I mean, mom just probably doesn't know. I'm not judging her. But maybe nobody taught her, so I could perhaps help change her life in a better direction.

Research Question Two

Research Question Two asked, "How do elementary school teachers describe their experiences of support in addressing the autonomy of elementary school students who are chronically absent?" Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that having autonomy attempts to explain the desire to be in control of one's own life, but not to the exclusion of having others involved. This concept reinforces those situations that give autonomy instead of taking it away and positively affect personal growth and development. During the data gathering process, teachers almost universally pointed out that the age of elementary school students who are chronically absent makes building autonomy difficult. The universal consensus amongst the teachers was that building autonomy is multifaceted, and often they are challenged to redirect established student autonomy in a way that is more helpful in the educational process. On the one hand,

students who must rely on adults for virtually all decisions are not in control of their circumstances, and therefore, lack autonomy. For example, Ellen observed during her interview,

> I feel like, at this age, they're not in control of their own life. They do as their parents tell them, and if a parent tells them to stay home and watch a younger sibling, that's just what they're going to do.

In contrast, participants discussed that many chronically absent students may possess greater autonomy, albeit not always in a good way compared with their schoolmates. The teachers explained that chronically absent students often lack support in the home. These students develop premature independence, which can make it difficult for them to transition from making most decisions at home to having decisions made for them within a rules-based, structured school setting. Jill described this notion in this way:

> Well, many of those kids come in, and they already must do so much for themselves, even when they are so little. Some of them, you know, are very good at that [autonomy] already. I mean, it does [outside school impediments] almost put a lot of pressure on them to be adults.

The general consensus of the participants was that how elementary school teachers support students who are chronically absent in building autonomy is complicated. Teachers want students to be independent but in a way that is helpful to their educational development.

Teachers revealed many ways they support students who are chronically absent in building autonomy. One way, as Francis described in her interview, was for students to manage what they have the power to control and how she supports them through building connections and being committed to them:

> We [teachers] try to get them to be the best students they can be. To be responsible, follow the rules, and realize that school is a community, and their decisions affect others and themselves. So, I'm just teaching them to be responsible and take control of their life. They are not going to have an adult to go with them everywhere. They are going to have to remember to do things on their own.

Kelly furthered the discussion in her interview on building autonomy for students who are chronically absent and helping them in controlling their own life by focusing on their individuality and reminding them of how important they are to their class. In doing so, Kelly explained how her commitment and compassion for students who are chronically absent to feel connected with others and feel good about themselves empowers them, even at a young age:

> Well, I think that when students are in the classroom, part of my responsibility is to teach them how to like who they are and what they have to contribute. I feel like that is so essential as a teacher. I feel as teachers, we have the power to empower kids and make them feel like they can do things. I am responsible for trying to empower my students to practice autonomy and to be themselves and that they can do things.

Other ways in building autonomy for students who are chronically absent involves exercising compassion and building connections by teachers. As Lisa stated in her interview, "Again, it's a lot of one-on-one conversation of how to solve a problem on their own." Irene further added in her interview how vital connections are in building autonomy:

> I always try to build a strong relationship with all of them and get to know each of them on a personal level. What do you like to do at home? What's going on in your home life? Building that relationship. You know, it's important that they feel a connection to me. I

> feel like by making those connections that's going to give them that intrinsic motivation to want to succeed, to be independent, whether they're in or out of the classroom.

However, as Gina indicated in her interview, it is difficult to maintain a connection to build autonomy when the student is frequently absent, often leading to many accommodations to help them catch up with their peers:

> Well, it's a little bit harder to build a relationship with them [students who are chronically absent]; if they are absent a lot, you don't feel like you get to know them as well; you don't get to know their needs, you know, you're constantly playing makeup with them. I think the fundamental lack of routine affects students a lot, and you are, you know, continually having these kinds of fragmented conversations with them, where you feel like you get something started, and then they're absent. You have to makeup, you know, something else. And so, it's just not a good flow and sadly affects your relationship and how much you can get done with them.

Although widespread sentiment existed amongst the participants regarding the students' ability to affect their absence due to student age and reliance on adults, teachers in this study indicated that they engage in support activities to build the autonomy needed to succeed through active communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. As Cindy disclosed in her interview,

> One thing I did was I had a class dinner on a Sunday night; it was for families. I would reach out to the moms in my regular weekly newsletter that I emailed, and the kids always want to come. Because it's fun, they get to go out to eat with their friends and see kids see other kids and play.

Francis indicated that she engages in helping students who are chronically absent get caught back up on their work in building autonomy. In doing so, she connects with her students and demonstrates compassionate accommodation. She stated in her interview,

> If they're absent, I help them get caught up and help them complete their work. I usually tell them like, I am here to help you, you know, we may not get it all finished today, but we're going to get it caught up. I try to give them some responsibility to try to complete something independently. I don't want them to rely all the time on an adult being there to tell them every step to make on that.

The participants of this study shared many different experiences in addressing and supporting autonomy in students who are chronically absent that are interconnected within the previously described four C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. Dawn described how she supports building autonomy, incorporating all of the previously described four C's, more directly when she stated in her interview, "I mean, in general, like, I tried to be very much what each kid needs me to be."

Research Question Three

Research Question Three asked, "How do elementary school teachers describe their support experiences in addressing the needs of relatedness of elementary school students who are chronically absent?" Relatedness explains the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Blair reinforced this concept in her interview, describing her role in building relatedness amongst students who are chronically absent in explaining her responsibility with connecting: "My responsibility is to get them here to build a relationship to close the academic gap. If you don't work and get them caught up, the gap gets bigger. Eventually, it's impossible for them to be successful." Teachers during the study

described many ways they approach building relatedness. Blair went on to tell what it is like when students who are chronically absent return and how she projects affection by encouraging peer support as an accommodation in building relatedness:

> A lot of times, their friends will come and help them. They'll be like, hey, yesterday, we did this—let me show you. So, I encourage this behavior, and on my level [kindergarten], they're still very caring and want to help that friend out.

The data contained a consistent premise that to support students who are chronically absent in building relatedness, teachers must change their mindset about absenteeism. Teachers indicated that they need to think about not isolating these students further and rely on linking them with others to bring them back into the academic routine when they return to school. Ellen described her experiences in her interview in this way: "So, trying to pull them back in or get them reconnected sometimes is a struggle. I do a lot of pair share to accommodate them: 'Hey, share this with your partner' has been good." Ellen also described building connections and accommodating students who have missed work while trying to help them catch up with their classmates. Ellen stated in her interview,

> I refocus the questions I usually use, so they're not feeling left out. I also bring in different examples to review instead of how I normally review to accommodate them. Also, the students here during the time can be the "teachers" and work with the kids that were absent. I've had to change my mindset on how I question and present, so they don't feel left out.

Amanda described how she had accomplished building relatedness with students, focusing on how she also uses others to assist in helping her:

> Yeah, they need a person. When I was [working as] a psychometrist, I would, a lot of times, with some kids who had experienced chronic absenteeism for several years, off and on, I would get them to connect with a teacher—just have a grown-up that was just their person to go to. They could go by this teacher's classroom every day if needed—they didn't have to. It was just to try to build that relationship and a safe place. With one of my students now, some of his behaviors were a bit concerning, so I started pulling another child into the class who cognitively is a little bit lower than this child. Still, the hope was that he would be able to help and work with this child, and they would walk to PE [Physical Education] together once they finished with me. And so, he would be able to be in kind of a, you know, "I care" type role. Things like that, anything that we can do, I think, to develop those skills in school setting, I try to do to build on how they relate.

In one of the focus groups, Francis indicated another area that many of the teachers within the research discussed by stating that "encouraging students is vital to building relatedness." In doing so, Ellen was describing how she connects with her students who are chronically absent and how important projecting affection is to build their relatedness. Francis stated,

> I am like, you know, I'm here for you. I am on your team. I want you to know I am your biggest cheerleader. I do try to tell them a lot that we care about them, and we care what happens to them.

At the same focus group, Heidi added how teachers must also try to share personal stories to build connections, show compassion, and bond while discussing how to support students in building relatedness. Heidi stated,

> I mean, personally, being able to relate to them is just sharing stories from my childhood with them, letting them know it's going to be okay. I think, again, at the age level that I

> am working with [fourth grade], that does not hinder them too severely, and they just move on. This goes back to that resilient thing we talked about earlier.

The teachers in this study, regardless of what they endeavored to do in supporting students who were chronically absent, reemphasized that routine was essential. When repeated absences disrupt the routine, progress erodes, skills are depreciated, and they find they must start over again. The teachers consistently indicated that parents are often hindrances in their pursuit of building and maintaining a predictable routine in supporting relatedness. The participants almost universally described how communication with parents is often difficult and establishing a teacher–parent relationship can be difficult. Jill, in her interview, described this phenomenon in this way:

> I would say back to the consistency, again, that just not having the time or the routine gets disrupted to focus on those things. Also, often it is the parents, like the lack of support from them, or just, you know, they don't answer emails or phone calls. When you're trying to build up these students and not getting any support at home, that's always difficult. Because if it's not reinforced at home, then it just doesn't stick at school.

The participants of this study provided many different experiences in addressing and supporting relatedness in students who are chronically absent that are interconnected within the aforementioned four C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. The participants contended that any considerations to build relatedness must incorporate efforts both inside and outside the classroom.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the

elementary school level. Chapter Four provided a detailed description of the 12 elementary school teachers who participated in the study and the dialogue resulting from the three data collection methods. Four major themes were discussed: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. These four C's, in alignment with the identified research questions, explained how elementary school teachers addressed and supported students who are chronically absent through the participants' lived experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school teachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. Chapter Five begins with the interpretations of the study's results and a summary of thematic findings. Following this, the implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations, and delimitations are outlined. Finally, this chapter concludes with future research recommendations and a study summary.

Discussion

The findings of this study include the experiences of public school teachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. In this section, I discuss the study's findings in light of the developed themes and subthemes and viewed through the lens of the supporting theoretical framework. The interpretation of the findings is discussed first, followed by implications for policy and practice. Theoretical and empirical implications are then conveyed, and the limitations and delimitations of the study are communicated. This section concludes with recommendations for future research. Participants' quotations are used to support and confirm my interpretations of the study's findings.

Interpretation of Findings

The theme development process began after each interview, carried on through the four focus groups, and culminated with the return and analysis of a writing prompt. Detailed descriptions of experiences supporting students who are chronically absent were derived through the dialogue and written testimony provided by the 12 elementary school teachers who participated in the study. Focusing on elementary school teachers in the southeast United States,

this study addressed the gap in empirical research regarding how teachers convey support to students who are chronically absent by building competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Each participant had experience supporting chronically absent students and disclosed their experiences through three data gathering methods, including individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts. The details explained in Chapter Four captured the essence of lived experiences of how teachers support students who are chronically absent while being responsible for their academic success. Four major themes emerged: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. These four C's, in alignment with the research questions, explained how elementary school teachers address and support students who are chronically absent through the participants' lived experiences.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The study's findings involve themes and subthemes developed through the lived experiences of 12 elementary school teachers. Four major themes emerged: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. The major theme of communication has two subthemes of coordination and technology. Collectively, the 12 teachers discussed various ways they attempt to communicate with stakeholders that have an interest in a student who is chronically absent. In building student competence and relatedness, teachers become the critical nexus of coordinating assistance, often outside regular school hours and within many different situations. Their efforts in conveying support through communication and coordination are enhanced through various technologies, such as emails and group texts, to more sophisticated practices like teaching virtually within an online classroom.

Teachers also discussed the major theme of connections, including teacher and student connections and teacher and parents or guardians' connections. During the study, the teachers

expressed their sincere attempts to connect with their students in many different ways in building relatedness. They also discussed those same attempts with parents and guardians but expressed frustration when parents or guardians do not reciprocate connection efforts. Teachers disclosed the importance of connecting and how detrimental it can be when students are not routinely present; the relationship weakens and must continuously be reestablished.

The major theme of compassion was also derived from teacher experiences as teachers expressed the need for students who are chronically absent to feel loved, accepted, and important. How attention is provided or withheld, particularly for these students, can build or destroy their self-esteem. The participants explained that when building autonomy and relatedness amongst students who are chronically absent, it is vitally important to remove any bias and change their mindset about students not being on time or being absent. There were many instances in this study where the teachers made it a point to indicate that being chronically absent is not always the child's fault but rather lies in the hands of the adults in their lives. In her writing prompt, Heidi stated a view universally shared by others: "98% of the time, though, it was not the student's fault."

Finally, the major theme of commitment encompasses two subthemes: outside-of-class efforts and overcoming barriers to attendance. The teachers unanimously indicated that for teachers to build competence and autonomy, they must be committed to their students and possess genuine concern. As such, their involvement often requires engagements with chronically absent students outside of class to help them overcome impediments in attendance. The teachers offered a wide range of ways they are committed and instances where they were both successful and unsuccessful. These four major C’s—communication, connections, compassion, and commitment—along with their subthemes and alignment with the research

questions, explained how elementary school teachers address and support students who are chronically absent through the participants' lived experiences.

Student Adversity

Student adversity was the most significant interpretation of this research study. At some point in the data gathering process, each teacher in this study expressed accounts of adversity amongst chronically absent students and how these broad ranges of difficulties affect the student's attendance, and frequently performance, while at school. Lisa disclosed in her interview that students who are inconsistently present struggle to adjust to the rigors of the classroom environment, making and keeping friendships, and often display behavioral problems as an effect of the continuous disruption of their routine.

As I conducted this research, I came to suspect that there might be a correlation between students who are chronically absent, their home environment, and the need for teachers to become the focal point of mitigation on behalf of the child. That is, the greater the adversity a student is experiencing outside of school causing their absence, the greater the need for teacher and school intervention in supporting students who are chronically absent. My perception is also aligned with the literature. Chronic absenteeism is driven by stressful life occurrences such as overlapping medical, individual, family, and social factors, including chronic illness, mental health conditions, bullying, perceived lack of safety, health problems or needs of other family members, inconsistent parenting, poor school climate, economic disadvantage, and unreliable transportation (Allen et al., 2018). Koslouski and Stark (2021) found that chronic or prolonged exposure to adverse experiences without a nurturing adult can result in enormous stress. This stress can significantly impact brain development, mental health, and the ability to learn in the classroom (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). From a cognitive and physiological standpoint,

elementary students' brains are still developing. The frontal, temporal, occipital, and parietal lobes are growing in size and ability (Spielman et al., 2020). The brain growth spurts experienced in childhood through adolescents tend to follow Piaget's (1936) sequence of cognitive development so that significant changes in neural functioning account for cognitive advances (Brod et al., 2017; Kolb & Whishaw, 2009; Overman et al., 1992). Furthermore, elementary school students are almost exclusively dependent and typically rely on the adults in their life to make decisions for them and fully assist them in their daily and educational endeavors. These factors make elementary students uniquely vulnerable to adversity and particularly influenced by teacher support because of their mental and physical developmental stage. Elementary students observe, identify, learn, experience, and replicate behaviors, social norms, attitudes, and socioemotional skills. During these crucial years, cognitive development is a distinctive process specific to each school-age child. Sometimes school-age children may exhibit cognitive difficulties that affect their learning and impact their behavior. Understanding elementary students' physical and emotional development during these years helps researchers explain why predictable routines and curricula are necessary for educational growth.

As I interpreted the adversity faced by students who are chronically absent as described by the elementary school teachers, I determined that the wide variety of experiences underscores how crucial schoolteachers are in several ways. Teachers are essential in identifying students facing adversity and helping them connect with needed resources. They are also the nexus in providing support as described by the four C's during critical mental and psychological growth periods in these students' lives. Chronic absenteeism appeared in this study to be driven by many events. In listing just a few examples provided by the participants, causes for chronic absenteeism included student and family medical problems, mental health conditions, parental

apathy, dirty or unserviceable clothing, students required to babysit siblings, inconsistent parenting, poor home environment, economic disadvantage, student anxiety, and unreliable transportation. As Gina indicated in her writing prompt, "Procedures [school] in place must address not only the problem of chronic absenteeism but also attempt to find the root of the cause and address those needs. Clearly, in most cases, there are underlying causes for chronic absenteeism."

The Use of Technology

I observed during the data gathering process that within the modern school, technology has gradually become a way of disseminating information, interacting with one another, and enhancing the learning experience. The use of leveraging technology was prolific amongst schoolteachers in this study. Throughout the data gathering, teachers conveyed their widespread leveraging of various technologies in supporting students, especially those who are chronically absent. Furthermore, the use of technology was even more rampant during the second half of 2019 and the entire 2020 academic year in Alabama during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were taken to an exclusive virtual setting. Although the schools involved in this study had returned to face-to-face delivery, there remains a high level of technology use in the teaching community. Cindy explained what many other schoolteachers indicated during data gathering by mentioning that after the pandemic, when everyone returned to school, some technology use practices have endured. All assignments, worksheets, videos, and so forth at her school are placed online. This practice has not only benefited everyone involved but has specifically assisted students when they are absent. Students can now obtain lessons and materials, if they have internet access, wherever they are and whenever needed.

In interpreting the data, I concluded that technology improves each teacher's effort in providing support to students who are chronically absent through all four of the C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. I observed that teachers in this new era who use a greater amount of technology require greater flexibility and new ways of teaching, particularly when supporting students who are chronically absent. Teachers must now plan to deliver curricula in the classroom that incorporates many skills and intelligence levels and make use of technology and multimedia. In doing so, they can convey support even if the student is absent. Exemplified throughout the experiences expressed by the participants in this study, the technology evolution in the current classroom will assist teachers in bringing education to the student rather than the student to the brick-and-mortar building. This is a similar concept already in practice amongst many online college programs. It might be a good alternative when a student faces adverse conditions preventing them from regularly attending.

The Role of Resources

In leading this study, I concluded that a student, school, or district's financial capability is relevant to supporting chronically absent students. Previous research indicated that chronic absenteeism, amongst other characteristics, is also a social and economic equity issue (Gee, 2018). Gee (2018) noted that chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent among minority groups, low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, highly mobile students, and those already involved in the juvenile justice system. In gathering the participant's experiences and interpreting the data, I found that in many cases, chronic absenteeism reflects the school district's financial status rather than measuring how well the district is academically performing. The teachers' experiences, shared during this study, indicated that underprivileged students face enormous adversity before stepping into a classroom compared to their affluent

peers. The findings of this study align with the literature concerning hardship within low-income communities and households. McKenzie (2019) revealed that impoverished children see many chronic stressors. Chronic stressors include unsafe neighborhoods with high crime levels, parents making minimum wage, which causes financial stress on the family, a disproportionate number of separated or divorced parents, siblings living in different households, and overcrowded homes. Jill professed in her focus group that, in her experience, "It always seems like it was the lower socio-economic families that had a harder time getting to school."

Many children raised in poverty come to school without the necessary social–emotional responses needed to develop relationships with their peers and teachers (Gutierrez & Buckley, 2019; Jensen, 2013). In other words, the experiences provided by the participants led me to conclude that those who already tend to face significant adversity and for whom the school is particularly beneficial are far more likely to be negatively affected by repeatedly missing school. I further found that teachers become a critical nexus between providing support within considerable adverse circumstances and student success. The experiences the teachers shared exposed how important district finances are in providing support to students who are chronically absent. Many teachers expressed how the lack of financial resources hindered them from supporting students who are chronically absent. Amanda provided an example, a view shared by many other participants, when she stated in her writing prompt that although she now works in a district that has resources for her to support students who are chronically absent, she recognizes that support relies heavily on school financial capability.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study revealed several implications for policy and practice. The results exposed how elementary school teachers support students

who are chronically absent while being responsible for their academic success. Teachers, administrators, superintendents, and educational leadership can use these implications to improve the educational experience for vulnerable students.

Implications for Policy

Schoolteachers are often expected to implement the latest absenteeism prevention program alone. Okilwa and Barnett (2017) found that teachers cannot improve academic success single-handedly. A team approach that involves teachers, parents, and the community makes the work of turning around schools and sustaining educational excellence a more manageable endeavor. One implication is for educational leaders to compose policy that ensures that not only teachers but all resources are leveraged to support students who are chronically absent. Ellen suggested some excellent policies in her writing prompt that I also support. I believe that policies need to be holistic in approach, coordination, and application. In achieving this policy recommendation, teachers appear from this study to be best suited to provide insight and must participate in the process.

Teachers need a voice in setting policy for their school. The teachers' experiences revealed that chronic absenteeism is a target area for many school districts to improve student achievement. To raise student attendance and academic success, schools often try to identify who is chronically absent and determine if there are cohesive subgroups of children most affected. As the literature shows, these subgroups may include recent immigrants, single-parent households, or caregivers with economic or health challenges (Lim et al., 2019). The data from this study led me to conclude that there remains a broad range of reasons why students are chronically absent. There is no single solution that would transfer to every district and school. Any implications for the policy must ensure that the strategy provides support based on the specific needs of the

district, school, and even the individual student. District and school policymakers must include teachers when determining what works best within their community. One way to achieve the correct type of policy is by surveying teachers at the end of the academic year and determining how policy should be specifically constructed to support them in the new school year. Each district and school will not face identical adversity year to year. Individual students who have been identified as being chronically absent and their reasons for being absent should be used as the baseline for detailed policy efforts. For example, suppose the district, school, or personal reason for students being chronically absent is a lack of transportation. In that case, policy changes might include moving bus routes, allowing for common-sense exceptions, or an allowance to have a student picked up by rotating faculty or community volunteers during the year. Regardless of the reason for the absences, discovering how teachers address and support students who are chronically absent will provide an opportunity for educational leaders to develop policy and assistance.

One final implication for policy is the need for financial resources to support students who are chronically absent. Just as each district and school will not have identical adversity year to year, they will also not have the same financial resources. When schools have highly rigid attendance policies without offering help and guidance to students and families, they are ineffective in valuing the unique needs of each student. Policy, resources, and program considerations must be explored to respond to adverse situations and assure healthy development through intervention programs within the school setting. However, these interventions through policy have associated costs. Superintendents and other school leaders should seek financial commitments from their local communities. One strategy may be for districts and schools to sell advertisements to raise funds. Schools have long sold advertising space to local businesses on

playfield fences and stadium billboards. Students are now seeing commercial pitches in cafeterias, auditoriums, buses, and report cards (Brydolf, 2013). Brydolf (2013) indicated that some school districts are working with for-profit firms to negotiate advertising and sponsorship contracts that match Fortune 500 companies with groups of school districts with a combined enrollment of 40,000 and 50,000. Participating communities do not invest money up front. If the company finds appropriate sponsors, districts can expect to collect between $10 and $20 per student yearly (Brydolf, 2013). Other measures may be targeting wealthy donors within the community by naming parts of the school in their honor, as seen at universities, or raising funds through other creative initiatives. Regardless of how resources are achieved, school leaders must be committed to delivering the funds necessary to support students.

Implications for Practice

The experiences provided by the teachers of this study led me to conclude that parents or guardians often do not fully know what the attendance policy is for their school, the importance of attending school every day on time, or the role technology plays in supporting students and keeping parents informed. They are also unaware that lessons are often, if not always, available online to do outside of school hours. Research has indicated that parents of students who are chronically absent often believe that their child's attendance is comparable to other students in their class (Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2018). One way to assist parents or guardians in being aware of all policies for their school is to meet with them, provide the guidelines, and answer any questions. Other ways are to have policies available in multiple languages, printed for distribution, and posted in the school and online. Schools should consider having multilingual assistance if required during these engagements. Further, school leaders should consider

allowing internet access for parents in their library as needed or pay for internet service in the home and the student's device when there is evidence of demonstrated need.

Another implication for practice involves English language learners (ELLs). The data from this study led me to suggest that support methods should be utilized for ELL students and families. The South is home to substantial portions of the nation's ELLs and migrant student populations (Robson et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2017). Researchers have indicated that students from these demographics are at greater risk of being chronically absent from school (Gottfried, 2014; Ready, 2010). Moreover, regular daily attendance appears even more critical for at-risk students, such as ELLs and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged households, who are statistically already in danger of falling behind academically (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). As a practice, schools should provide instructions, policies, news, and other pertinent information in multiple languages to accommodate students and their families. Schools should consider investing in translation software for online support, produce documents in appropriate languages, and train faculty and staff to communicate and associate with ELLs and their culture.

One final implication for practice uncovered during this study surrounds practices that build upon the four C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. The participants offered many successful approaches they use in their classrooms, ranging from hugs and greetings in the morning with each student to mass text messaging and weekend visits to chronically sick students. School leaders should gather practices and ensure teachers share best practices to better prepare them to convey support. Additionally, school leaders should provide social work, psychological, and other relevant training and courses to ensure teachers have the skills necessary to be holistically ready. As Kelly pointed out, teachers are insufficiently

prepared; she stated in her writing prompt: "I mean, we've had no training on dealing with chronically absent students."

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings that resulted from this analysis have theoretical and empirical implications. The theory supporting the study was Ryan and Deci's (1980) social determination theory (SDT). Based on implications from this study, recommendations relating to how teachers support chronically absent students are made for stakeholders.

Theoretical Implications

The theory guiding this transcendental phenomenological study was SDT. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level. SDT helps explain how teachers support chronically absent elementary students through three constructs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Self-determination theorists believe that when social support from teachers and parents is established, the level of support becomes a strong predictor of whether an early adolescent's disengagement in the education process will be high or low (Fredricks et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The SDT framework facilitated the explanation of how the decision of an adolescent to either become chronically absent or drop out of school in the future, rather than completing the education process, is primarily influenced by the amount of social support that a teacher and parent provide as perceived by the student throughout their educational journey. Castrechini et al. (2016) indicated that perceived or real support often begins in kindergarten and molds perceptions through high school. As Kearney (2008) stated, "Students with excessive absenteeism are at high risk for permanent dropout from school" (p. 258).

Each elementary school teacher in this study had encountered students who were chronically absent and discussed their support through the constructs of SDT. The experiences gathered from each of the 12 elementary school teacher participants in this study suggested that building the competence, autonomy, and relatedness of students who are chronically absent improves students' attendance, attitude, self-esteem, and desire to be engaged with the educational process. Exemplifying the construct of building competence, Francis shared in her interview that she approaches building competence by letting her students know that while they are at school, they are growing their brains. Other teachers described various methods for building competence, all confirming that this SDT construct is vital in addressing the issue of chronically absent students. Francis mentioned how she motivates students to get caught up and want to be at school:

> When I am trying to build competence with returning students who have been chronically absent, I'll say, "We really missed you. I'm sad when you're not here, and I'm happy when you're here." And I always talk about telling my kids that when they're at school, they grow their brains. "Every day you are here you're growing your brain, and it's getting bigger and bigger. And when you're not here, your brain isn't growing as much because you're not learning." I used this today with one little girl who is catching up because she was absent.

For the construct of autonomy, the universal sentiment amongst the teachers indicated that building autonomy is complicated. Teachers want elementary students to be independent but in a way that is helpful to their educational development. The participants in their descriptions made it clear that students who are chronically absent are often placed in situations that require independent decision-making at home well above typical age expectations; when they return to

school, they often have difficulties adjusting to the structured authority found in the classroom. However, teachers support students by providing balance and helping them build autonomy to take control of their young lives in a way best suited to place education as a priority. Jill, in her interview, explained one example where she uses a technique of providing choice to build autonomy amongst chronically absent students. She stated,

> Some seem to want to make their own choices, and sometimes, outside, they don't get a lot of choices. Nobody wants to be made to do something. So, the more choice you can give them, even if it's something as simple as, do you want to use your blue or red crayon. Just having that little bit of control can sometimes really help them build autonomy. [Having options] is almost like a calming thing, and they don't get as anxious or feel like they have that little bit of control, even if it's just a matter of choice.

The third SDT construct is relatedness. Across all the data gathering methods, the participants emphasized how essential it is to build relatedness amongst students who are chronically absent. The teachers discussed how providing a supportive, culturally responsive classroom environment fosters solid relationships and draws students into school. They discussed how frequently absent students have difficulties making friends and feeling as if they belong to the group since they are always starting back after returning. This inconsistency often presents itself in behavioral problems and causes the student to feel anxious and want to remove themselves from the classroom. Kelley described one chronically absent student during her interview who could not make it through the day without asking to leave school due to anxiety and how she supported the student through building relatedness. A pronounced theme amongst the teachers, Kelly described how she worked to resolve the student’s fear and help him relate to the class:

> I can think of one instance where the child could stay at school more, which seemed to be his primary goal. His attitude may have changed as I helped him build relatedness and let him know I cared about him and that he and I would stay here no matter what. So, by speaking with him and the parents and building trust, we all got on the same page, and he wasn't going to call home and try to leave. He ended up being at school more that year. He could work through the anxiety, overcome his meltdown, come out on the other side, and still be at school.

The results and theoretical implications of this transcendental phenomenological study exploring the experiences of public school teachers who provided support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level through the theoretical lens of the SDT are clear. This study confirmed that offering support to students who are chronically absent through the constructs of SDT often increases attendance and generally makes these students feel welcomed, loved, and part of the class. The study's participants seemed to confirm the conclusions of social determination theorists. However, the participants also identified how many of their efforts are lost when parents or guardians are uncooperative, apathetic, or generally unhelpful. The conclusions of this study using the SDT as a guide might be transferrable for future research within the educational career field.

Empirical Implications

The 12 teacher participants' lived experiences gathered during this research verified many empirical research conclusions regarding the broad topic of chronic absenteeism within the U.S. public school system. Previous research suggested that between 5 and 7.5 million students are chronically absent from public school each year (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). Chronic absenteeism occurs in every grade level, but research suggests that students in the early

elementary grades experience high rates of chronic absenteeism (Bartanen, 2020; Buyse et al., 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008; Robinson et al., 2018). The participants substantiated that chronic absenteeism is prevalent within their elementary public school district and that full participation in school is critical for social and academic development. Each teacher disclosed that they have experienced students who are chronically absent during their careers and that in some districts where they have taught elementary students, the issue was considerably common. The early emergence of chronic absenteeism by the youngest of students is especially concerning because kindergarten and elementary school attendance strongly predicts student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2018).

Empirical research indicated that at least 10% of kindergarten and first-grade students miss a month or more of the school year with lower socioeconomic areas at four times greater risk of this phenomenon than their middle-class peers (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Romero & Lee, 2008). In fact, during the 2013–2014 school year, nearly 1 in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students were chronically absent (Allison & Attisha, 2019). As a result, students who are chronically absent score well below their peers on third-grade reading and math tests at every elementary grade level (Dubay & Holla, 2016; Hernandez, 2011). Despite the well-documented association between elementary school attendance and positive student outcomes, parents of elementary school students do not necessarily correlate the importance of attendance and academic success (Ehrlich et al., 2015). Test scores and statistical analysis were not confirmed in this study; however, the research participants shared that the parents and guardians of students who are chronically absent do not seem to understand the need for consistent, on-time attendance. Several teachers expressed that they believe that many parents and guardians view elementary school, particularly early elementary school, as childcare instead of a vital

developmental aspect of their child's educational process for future success. Furthermore, the general consensus amongst the participants was that parents do not view tardiness as having any negative impact on their child's success. However, the teachers pointed out that they start their classes on time and have routines established to begin each day. These routines are intended to reinforce social and academic growth but are habitually missed by students who are chronically absent or show up 1, 2, or 3 hours after class has started.

This research also expands current empirical data by showing how the participants' lived experiences substantiated the acute need to provide emotional support to students who are chronically absent. Farmer et al. (2011) indicated that teachers' emotional support is crucial for students' social functioning and academic engagement. Additionally, many participants suggested that every student deserves to receive an education at a standard proficiency level, but in many instances students who are chronically absent do not succeed in school. Current studies express that it is every child's civil right to receive an education within the United States at a standard proficiency level (Adler-Greene, 2019; Evans-Winters et al., 2018; Knight, 2019). However, as Lim et al. (2019) indicated, there is evidence that despite efforts in innovative curriculum, classroom technology, legislation, and enormous financial investments, significant problems remain with students not attending school. The teachers in this study agreed that chronic absenteeism is a complicated problem involving individual initiative in addition to upgrades and improvements. When technology, financial investments, and community support are combined with personal and tailored initiatives by teachers, attendance is improved.

Finally, perhaps the most critical empirical implication derived from this research is associated with student adversity outside the classroom. In the past two decades, an extensive body of research has established the detrimental impact of poverty and economic hardship on

children's development and well-being (Avery et al., 2020; Capotosto, 2020; Neppl et al., 2016; Park & Holloway, 2018). Through their research, Romero and Lee (2008) learned that exposure to poverty and other risks arising from the sociodemographic characteristics of parents and families negatively impacts children's cognitive development, socioemotional functioning, and school attendance and performance. The patterns of intra-family interaction, communication, and poor quality of the environment in the home, the neighborhood, and the broader community are all considerations (Romero & Lee, 2008). A student's race is also a leading indicator of potential risk. Although some of the highest chronic absenteeism rates occur in urban, heavily non-White schools, high rates also occur in rural, predominantly White districts (Bruner et al., 2011; Dubay & Holla, 2016). This was evidenced in this study amongst the teacher representation from different districts in Alabama. Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent among minority groups, low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, highly mobile students, and ELLs; this was substantiated by the participants in this study. Regular daily attendance appears even more critical for ELLs and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged households, who are statistically already in danger of falling academically behind (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Students from English-speaking families are less likely to be chronically absent than their primarily non-English-speaking peers (Marsh, 2019). Regularly accounting for the various at-risk demographics in a school and district may assist in structuring policy and practices that bring maximum support to students who are chronically absent (Holme et al., 2014). This study adds to existing empirical research and provides valuable data for school officials and teachers to consider when making educational decisions.

One contribution made by this research that was not studied previously is the concept of conveying support to students who are chronically absent through the building of competence,

autonomy, and relatedness. The research participants revealed that conveying support in building these skills involved many supportive techniques through the four major themes discovered during this study, referred to as the four C's, which, when employed, might increase attendance and help students to be better positioned to progress socially and academically. These four C's involve ways of supporting students who are chronically absent through teacher communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. The teachers shared many ways they attempted to convey support in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness through the four C's. A few examples of these endeavors included building competence by forming a relationship with their students and lifting their self-esteem. Also, leveraging technology provides options to level impediments facing students outside their classrooms, which helps across all three skills. Other efforts included fostering autonomy: "To manage what they have the power to control and how to support them through building connections and being committed to them," as Francis suggested in her interview. Others discussed encouraging relatedness by promoting peer support as an accommodation when a student returns to school. With many lived experiences expressing how to build competence, autonomy, and relatedness skills, the teachers provided rich data contributing to the broad research topic of chronic absenteeism while congruently providing a new and more narrowed focus.

Across this research, the study participants disclosed that their success in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness relies heavily on support from other stakeholders to reinforce their efforts in the classroom. As Jill expressed in her interview, "If it's not reinforced at home, then it just doesn't stick at school." As embedded in existing research, chronic absenteeism is a complex and multifaced problem with many variables inside and outside the classroom. Given elementary students' age and physical ability, most elementary children depend

upon their primary caregivers to ensure they arrive at school every day. As educational leaders decide how to best support the students in their districts and schools, they should consider the findings of this study and the existing empirical research cited here to understand ways to mitigate adversity that prevents students from attending school within their communities.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study's limitations could be considered a perceived weakness and could not be controlled. One limitation of this study was the narrow racial and gender identities involved. A participant's identity can influence their rationality and view of the world, and in this study, all the participants were White females. During the recruitment process, there were no ethnic or gender disqualifiers; however, only White females volunteered to participate in the study. A second limitation to this research study was the limited number of schools that participated from the overarching potential population pool. As a researcher, I offered and solicited 19 school districts in northeast and central Alabama. Of those 19 districts, 15 districts were unresponsive after two separate solicitation efforts. Two school districts that did respond to the research request declined to participate, leaving two districts that provided approval. Amongst the two school districts that approved the research project, there were 18 schools in the districts, and each was provided an opportunity to participate. Of the 18 potential and approved schools, 12 teachers eventually volunteered to participate in the study; however, seven of the 12 participants belonged to a single school, three were produced through snowball sampling through participant collaboration, and two were from other schools in the other approved district. With such a concentration of participants from one school, a possible weakness could be derived from experiences in a more affluent teaching environment. The school with seven participants is located in a more prominent and wealthy part of the surrounding city, which may have limited

teacher experiences. It is noted that for this study, many participants had worked in other districts during their careers. Other limitations of this study are related to the study's qualitative research design. In a qualitative phenomenological study of elementary school teachers, it is assumed that each participant who volunteered to participate in the study was interested in the research topic, which could have influenced the way questions were answered, incorporating bias and conjecture.

The delimitations of the study involved the study boundaries I imposed. One delimitation was that this study did not offer any data or details from students who are chronically absent. The perception of students who are chronically absent may differ from teachers who support them at school. Additionally, the restrictions of gathering only teacher experience excluded parents, school support staff, and educational leadership, which would likely have provided different experiences in supporting chronically absent students. Finally, the transcendental phenomenological research design assisted the researcher in gathering lived experiences. This design did not allow for subjective interpretations of the phenomenon as permitted in a hermeneutical phenomenology design described in Creswell and Poth (2018). As a researcher, I acknowledge that different strategies may provide additional conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are centered on the limitations and delimitations and the findings of this study. The participants were selected from two public elementary school districts in the northeast and central Alabama. Future research may focus on recruiting participants in a broader geographical location or a different region within the United States. Research could be expanded to different levels of schools, such as middle and high school, and a comparison could be made between public and private schools. Although not intentional, most

participants in this study involved teachers from a more affluent school district. Future research should consider focusing on impoverished school districts as these districts have a greater need to convey teacher support. Additionally, participants could include perspectives from chronically absent students, their parents or guardians, and school support staff and leadership. Furthermore, although the research was open to all elementary school teachers meeting the screening criteria, only White female elementary school teachers volunteered to participate in the research. Future research may target a more diverse participant sample by limiting or excluding White female teachers from the research pool. Future researchers could also extend this study by using a different theoretical framework, such as Duckworth's (2016) theory of grit or Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Using these theories may provide additional perspective by focusing on the reliance and ability of one's mindset rather than the conveyance of support by others.

This study's findings suggest several directions for future research. First, elementary school teachers shared many ways they support students who are chronically absent, and the students are chronically absent for a broad range of reasons. A narrative study might be appropriate to explore individuals' accounts of the exact circumstances and adversities students and families experience that are the root causes for their repeated absences. Secondly, a case study would be appropriate to explore and focus on the teacher and how their school makes decisions and obtains resources supporting chronically absent students. In contrast, a grounded theory study could examine how teachers' personality determines their approaches to helping students who are chronically absent to generate a theory regarding personality and support strategies.

Conclusion

We as a nation are failing our most precious resource: our children. As I gathered data from the teachers who are directly and deeply involved, facing how they balance the enormity of daily tasks while doing their best to support students who are chronically absent, I determined that they support students who are chronically absent through four major themes, previously identified as the 4 C's: communication, connections, compassion, and commitment. Ultimately, the most significant interpretation from this study was a perceived correlation between students who were chronically absent, their home environment, and the need for teachers not only to recognize any hardship the student is facing but also to become the focal point of mitigation on behalf of the child. That is, the greater the adversity a student is experiencing outside of school causing their absence, the greater the need for teacher and school intervention and support. Additionally, this study revealed that the use of technology enhances the ability of a teacher to provide the four C's to students who are chronically absent. Still, students and parents do not benefit from their use in many instances and are locked out by a lack of language, knowledge, devices, and internet services. Those who would benefit the most from technology are restricted in ways not experienced by their more affluent classmates. A significant interpretation driving the various adversities facing chronically absent students, including the access to technology, was revealed as the role of resources in education. Any metric used to measure how students who are chronically absent are supported must also recognize that these students may be more influenced by financial means and community status than many other forces.

McKenzie (2019) indicated that underprivileged students face enormous adversity before entering a classroom. If needed to level the playing field for all students, educational leaders must begin to pursue creative and predictable funding streams that support their students' ability

to access education outside their typical budget. Educational leaders must also advocate for direct community involvement and target wealthy donors to ensure their students' success is the priority. This phenomenon is an "all hands on deck" civil rights atrocity across this country, with more than 7 million students being reported as chronically absent each year, virtually enslaving them to a life of poverty and institutionalized failure (CRDC, 2016; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). School districts, administrators, and individual teachers are the last line of defense, yet these entities are often the sole target of scrutiny when student performance is not at the expected level of proficiency (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Although there is no doubt that policy, educational model, and individual school professionals play an essential part in individual student academic achievement, this research revealed that they are not the only factors leading to, in many cases, a failing public school system. Students require many levels of support from teachers and other adults in their lives to guide them through their academic years. Students must be supported inside and, equally important, outside the classroom.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 17, 2022

Robert Ralston
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-759 A PHENOMENOLICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE EXPEREINCES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

Dear Robert Ralston, Gail Collins,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

From: [redacted]
To: [redacted]
Subject: Research Project [redacted]
Date: Wednesday, March 23, 2022 10:26:00 AM
Attachments: Research Advertisement Flyer.docx
Research Recuitment Letter.docx

Dr. [redacted] and Mrs. [redacted],

Good morning. As a follow-up to the note I sent out to all district leadership yesterday, I thought I might follow up with you this morning concerning [redacted] **to get some advice**.

As I mentioned in yesterday's district note, I am conducting research for my dissertation project at Liberty University and would like your permission and assistance to distribute a recruitment flyer and a recruitment letter to your school teachers – hoping that they will agree to participate.

What would be the best way to do that, and what would be the best timing? I know that Spring Break is coming up, and the last thing anyone is thinking about would be my recruitment flyer and letter

Would you be able to distribute the recruitment flyer and letter – or link this into your meetings or routine announcements? I thought that advertisement might be ok, but recruitment might need to wait until after spring break and the dust settles….but I would love your thoughts about the best way with the most significant opportunity in actually getting teachers to participate.

Thank you in advance for any help you can provide!

Vr,

Bobby Ralston

Research Participants Needed

A Study of Elementary School Teachers Who Have Experienced Chronically Absent Students

- Are you an elementary school teacher?
- Have you experienced and supported chronically absent students while teaching?
- Are you 18 years or older?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a critical research study.

The purpose of this study is to discover how teachers in the southeastern United States support and address students who are chronically absent. This study seeks to gather elementary school teacher experiences in supporting chronically absent students while responsible for their educational needs. Participants will have the benefit of collaborating with others with similar experiences and help the profession better understand supportive needs of those most vulnerable. Participants will also receive a **$25 Amazon** gift card for completing a **45-60 minute in-person (or online) interview** with the researcher, a **60-minute online focus group**, and a **two-question writing prompt** that should **take less than 30-minutes to complete.**

The study is being conducted within the Herculean School District
1234 Main Street
Anywhere, AL 12345

Colonel Robert (Bobby) Ralston, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting the study. An invitation letter to participate will be emailed to all elementary school teachers early next week!

Please contact Bobby at [redacted] or **rralston@liberty.edu** for more information.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear Volunteer:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education degree. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of public schoolteachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level by asking them how they build competence, autonomy, and relatedness to such students, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be elementary schoolteachers who have experience in supporting and addressing the needs of chronically absent students. Chronically absent is defined as those missing more than 15 days of scheduled classes in a school year. These absences include excused, unexcused, expulsion, suspensions, and truancy. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded, 45-60-minute, face-to-face, in-person or remote via Microsoft Teams interview; a one-hour, audio-recorded, online focus group via Microsoft Teams; and respond to a two-question writing prompt sent via email that should take about 30 minutes to complete. Participants will also be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, which should take about 15 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here **FILL OUT IN ONLINE FORMS** or use the below QR Code on your Smart Phone to answer the nine-question screening survey:

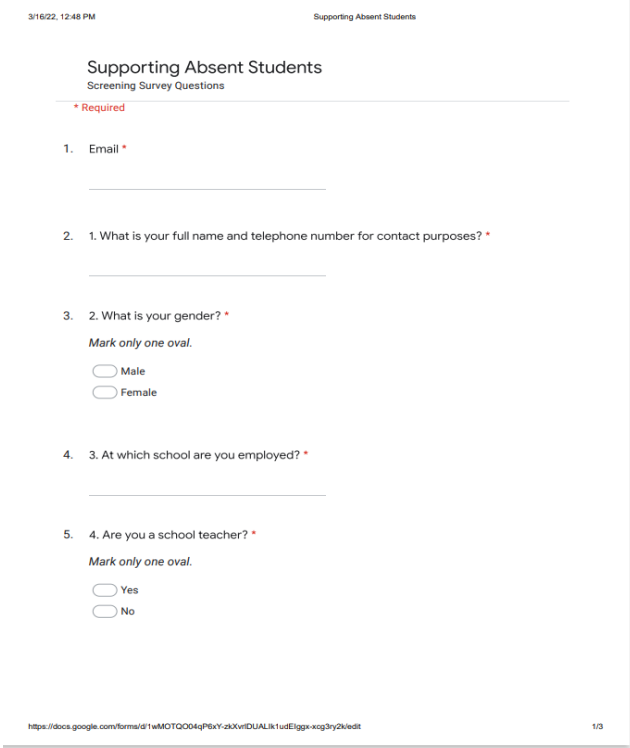
Upon completing this brief screening survey, I will review your answers and then email a participation consent form link and QR Code to qualifying volunteers. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to affirm your consent on the electronic form before I schedule your interview.

Participants will be compensated for participating. Each participant that completes all the procedures will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,

Colonel Robert (Bobby) Ralston
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University School of Education or rralston@liberty.edu

Appendix D: Screening Survey Questions



3/16/22, 12:48 PM Supporting Absent Students

Supporting Absent Students

Screening Survey Questions

* Required

1. Email *

2. 1. What is your full name and telephone number for contact purposes? *

3. 2. What is your gender? *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female

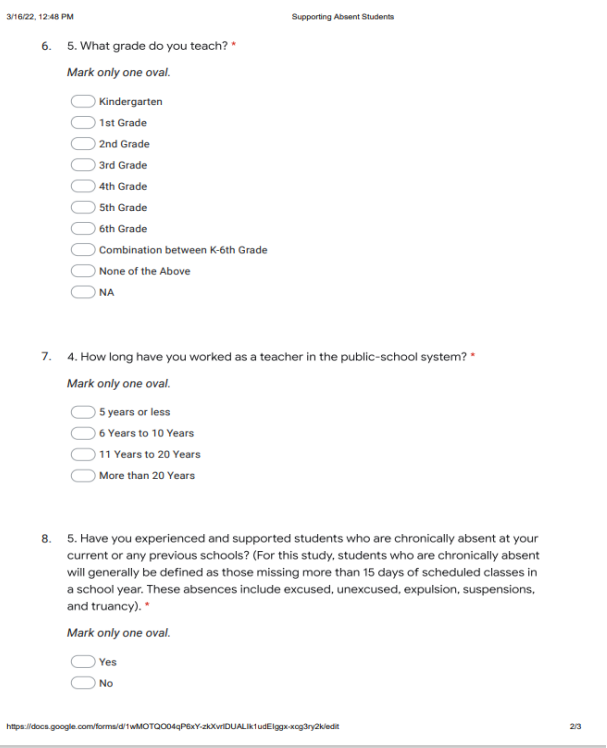
4. 3. At which school are you employed? *

5. 4. Are you a school teacher? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1wMOTQO04qP6xY-zkXvrIDUALIk1udElggx-xcg3ry2k/edit 1/3



3/16/22, 12:48 PM Supporting Absent Students

6. 5. What grade do you teach? *

Mark only one oval.

- Kindergarten
- 1st Grade
- 2nd Grade
- 3rd Grade
- 4th Grade
- 5th Grade
- 6th Grade
- Combination between K-6th Grade
- None of the Above
- NA

7. 4. How long have you worked as a teacher in the public-school system? *

Mark only one oval.

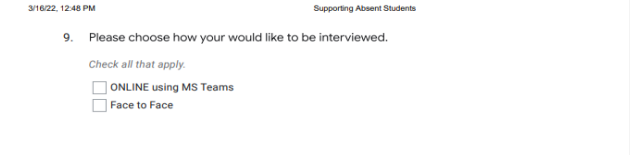
- 5 years or less
- 6 Years to 10 Years
- 11 Years to 20 Years
- More than 20 Years

8. 5. Have you experienced and supported students who are chronically absent at your current or any previous schools? (For this study, students who are chronically absent will generally be defined as those missing more than 15 days of scheduled classes in a school year. These absences include excused, unexcused, expulsion, suspensions, and truancy). *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1wMOTQO04qP6xY-zkXvrIDUALIk1udElggx-xcg3ry2k/edit 2/3



3/16/22, 12:48 PM Supporting Absent Students

9. Please choose how your would like to be interviewed.

Check all that apply.

- ONLINE using MS Teams
- Face to Face

Appendix E: Recruitment Final Notice

From: [redacted]
To: [redacted]
Subject: Chronically Absent Students
Date: Friday, April 22, 2022 9:10:00 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Research Recuitment Letter.docx

[redacted],

Good morning and Happy Friday!

As a follow-up – your assistance greatly helped in my recruiting efforts within the district. **I currently have recruited 7 teachers**, but need a minimum of **four more.** This is my last attempt to see if anyone might have time now, after Spring Break, to share their experiences.

In total, I suspect that from beginning to end, I will take up 3 hours of their time – not at once, but over the three engagements (1-hours interview, 1-hour online focus group – and a 2 question writing prompt emailed to them that shouldn't take more than 30 minutes to answer).

My interviews can be conducted through the MS Teams platform at the teacher's convenience. To participate, all they need to do is click here **FILL OUT IN GOOGLE FORMS** or use the below QR Code on your Smart Phone to answer the nine-question screening survey: This info is inside the recruitment letter as well, but have place it here in case you want to forward my note out.

I am offering a **Amazon gift card** to the **next 4** qualified elementary school teachers who volunteer and complete the research project. After I have four more, I will cut off the survey link.

If you have any questions at all, please reach out to me – my personal cell phone number is [redacted].

Thank you!

Vr,

Bobby

Appendix F: Email Notification to Selected Participants

From: [redacted]
To: [redacted]
Subject: Research Consent Form
Date: Saturday, April 9, 2022 2:57:00 PM
Attachments: image001.png
[redacted] IRB Approved 2 Consent Form.docx

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9 April 2022

Dear Ms. [redacted],

Based on your responses to my screening survey, you meet the requirements to participate in my study to explore the experiences of public-school teachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level.

I have attached a copy of the consent form for the study to this email. Please review the consent form and use this scheduling hyperlink or the below QR Code to sign the consent form and to begin scheduling your face to face or virtual (via MS Teams) interview.

If you choose to conduct the interview face-to-face, I will provide you with a copy of your consent document in person before we begin. If you choose to conduct your interview virtually, I will email you a copy of your consent document ahead of the scheduled time.

I encourage you to contact me if you have any questions prior to your interview at [redacted]

Thank you for your participation in this vital research! **Please encourage any of your collogues who may also qualify to participate!**

Vr,

Bobby

Appendix G: Consent Form

Title of the Study: A PHENOMENOLICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE EXPEREINCES OF PUBLIC SCHOOLTEACHERS WHO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

Principal Investigator: Robert L. Ralston, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an elementary schoolteacher in the southeastern United States and have experience in supporting and addressing the needs of students who are chronically absent in your classroom. Chronically absent is defined as those missing more than 15 days of scheduled classes in a school year. These absences include excused, unexcused, expulsion, suspensions, and truancy. Taking part in this research study is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of public schoolteachers who provide support for chronically absent students at the elementary school level.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an audio-recorded, face-to-face, 45–60-minute interview with the researcher, providing your experiences of the topic. Participants will also have the option of meeting on Microsoft Teams for the interview.
2. Participate in an approximately one-hour, audio-recorded, online focus group meeting with the researcher and other elementary schoolteacher participants who share similar experiences via Microsoft Teams.
3. Respond to a two-question writing prompt that will be emailed to you after your interview and focus group have been completed. This short writing prompt should take less than 30 minutes to complete.
4. Review the transcripts of your interview and your part of the focus group for accuracy. This should take about 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit by taking part in a collaborative conversation during the focus group meeting with other teachers who have students in their classes who are chronically absent.

Benefits for society include learning how teachers who have experienced working with students who are chronically absent from school were able to support them.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or school district. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to them. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer or locked box and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Hard copy data will be shredded.
- Individual interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. The researcher is committed to your confidentiality. All participants will be reminded not to discuss any information outside of the research study.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Each participant who completes the face-to-face interview (or online using Microsoft Teams), a Microsoft Teams virtual focus group, and returns their answers to the two-question writing prompt will receive a $25 gift card from Amazon.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There are no costs for your participation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time, without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be

included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Robert (Bobby) Ralston. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at rralston@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Gail Collins, at glcollins2@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By electrically affirming on an online form, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you affirm. You will be given a copy of this document and your affirmation for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of your affirmation with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you affirm this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

By electronic affirmation on an online form, I have acknowledged the researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Electronic Affirmation Date

(Copy of Affirmation Attached Below)

Appendix H: Interview Questions

1. Explain your favorite part of being a teacher. (Icebreaker)
2. Describe what you felt the first day in the classroom in front of your students. (Icebreaker)
3. Describe your experiences in addressing and supporting students who have been chronically absent. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
4. Describe your knowledge and interactions with students who are chronically absent in building their competence, that is, building their skills for controlling the outcomes and experiences in their lives. (RQ1)
5. Describe any investment or support, in or outside the school, that you provide to students who are chronically absent in terms of time, accommodation, emotional support, or any other type of support that builds student competence. (RQ1)
6. Describe your knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent in building their autonomy, that is, building their skills and desire to be in control of their own life. (RQ2)
7. Describe common, if any, characteristics in the autonomy of students who are chronically absent, or the students' actions that demonstrate their need to control their own life. (RQ2)

    Probe - Describe these students' everyday needs of autonomy based on your personal experiences. (RQ2)

    Probe - Describe how these students appear motivated, self-sufficient, and resilient and how you address any noticeable needs to help them control their own life. (RQ2)
8. Describe your relationship with students who are chronically absent, focusing on any

support activities used to build the autonomy needed for them to succeed. (RQ2)

9. Describe and explain your thoughts on your responsibility in building student autonomy as part of your student's academic success. (RQ2)
10. Describe your knowledge and interaction with students who are chronically absent in building their relatedness, or the student's ability to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others. (RQ3)
11. Describe and explain any impediments or barriers you have experienced in supporting and addressing your efforts to build relatedness with students who are chronically absent. (RQ3)

    Probe – Describe any difficulties in building student relatedness, or difficulties for them to stay connected to and be cared for, that becomes apparent to you when students are not present and then return. (RQ3)

12. Describe any experiences where community and school efforts have worked, or not worked, in lowering chronic absenteeism. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
13. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. I appreciate the time you have given to this research study thus far and will have our interview transcribed. Once I have the transcription completed, I will email the transcription to you for the validation of our conversation. Once all interviews are conducted, transcribed, and validated, I will schedule our online focus groups utilizing Microsoft Teams. There will be several dates and times to choose from to ensure you are able to participate. This second data collection method will enrich the research information and provide group dynamics to the research questions. Are there any questions or anything you would like to add before we conclude? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us all a little about your experiences in working with students who are chronically absent. (Icebreaker)
2. You may recall during our individual interview that you described your knowledge and interactions with students who are chronically absent in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness in students during your teaching career. Describe any students who are chronically absent who stand out in your memory, the circumstances surrounding them, and what support you may have provided. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
3. Describe any opinions you have formed of students who are chronically absent concerning their competence, or their skills to control the outcomes and experiences in their life. (RQ1)

    Probe: Describe any recollections where you saw significant changes in attitude, motivation, and performance as you focused on building their competence. (RQ1)
4. In thinking about your interview and the descriptions and explanations regarding your responsibility in building autonomy, or building the student's desire to be in control of their own life, describe any resources that you have found to be beneficial for building autonomy amongst students who are chronically absent. (RQ2)

    Probe – Describe how other teachers share information or advice concerning their experiences building personal autonomy with students who are chronically absent at your school. (RQ2)
5. In thinking about your interactions with parents of students who are chronically absent, describe how the relationship between you and the parents impacts your ability in building relatedness among chronically absent students, that is, the eagerness for the

student to seek and interact with other students, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others. Describe how communication between yourself and parents or guardians concerning relatedness with their children occurs. (RQ3)

Probe – Describe how parents or guardians receive any advice you provide in supporting relatedness or helping the student to better interact with, be connected to, and experience caring for and by others. (RQ3)

Probe - Describe how any changes in the student's attitude and performance may have resulted by discussing building relatedness with their parents or guardians from your support suggestions. (RQ3)

Probe – Explain how these types of interactions and experiences with parents help or hinder your attitude in supporting the relatedness amongst students who are chronically absent. (RQ3)

6. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. Is there anything else you would like to share with the group that you think would be essential for me to know about your view of addressing and supporting students who are chronically absent? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

Appendix J: Writing Prompt Questions

From: [redacted]
Bcc:
Subject: Writing Prompt
Date: Friday, May 13, 2022 1:45:00 PM
Attachments: Writing Prompt.docx

Research Participants.

Good afternoon. The attached MS Word document contains two questions. Please answer the two questions and to the best of your ability and return the document to me via email at [redacted] as soon as you can, but NLT **Next Friday, 20 May**.

Note that on page two there a place to enter the address that you wish for me to send your Amazon gift card.

I want to thank you very much for all your assistance and sharing your experiences during my research gathering. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Vr,

Bobby

Directions: Please answer the following two questions to the best of your recollection and ability and return no later than XX of XXX via email at rralston@liberty.edu. Thank you for your important contribution to this final data gathering method.

1. Reflecting on the various questions and your answers during our face-to-face interview and focus group, describe and evaluate yourself, your school, and your community in supporting students who are chronically absent in terms of building student competence, or their ability to control the outcome of their life. In answering this

question, explain what you see as effective policies, procedures, and resources, as well as what you consider ineffective. (RQ1, RQ3)

2. Reflecting on your participation in this research study, describe what you think would make it possible to substantially improve student autonomy and relatedness to reduce chronic absenteeism at your school. In answering this question, describe and provide examples of how your opinion was formed. (RQ2)

Note: Please provide the mailing address where you would like your Amazon Gift Card sent.

Appendix K: Participation Thank You Letter

19 May 2022

[redacted]

Dear Ms. [redacted],

I want to thank you for participating in my research study. I appreciate the time you have taken to conduct the individual interview, the focus group, and the writing prompt. Your involvement will help discover how teachers support chronically absent students within the education profession. Teachers often have very little extra time to spare with all their existing obligations. Your willingness to participate in this research is a credit to yourself, our vulnerable students, and the profession. Enclosed is your Amazon gift card as a small way to thank you for participating, and I wish you the best in your career.

Once again, I am incredibly grateful for you contributing your valuable time, experiences, and thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,

Hand Signed and Mailed

Colonel Robert L. Ralston
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
School of Education

Appendix L: Reflexive Journal

Date	Entries
14 October 2021	I will expend the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue to bracket out my experiences of being chronically absent during my high school years and any other bias I have and focus exclusively on the participating teachers of the study. I first came into this study thinking that students who are chronically absent had negative overtones. There are actually many reasons why students are absent other than simply "skipping school." Sickness, lack of transportation, lack of parental support, and many other issues outside of the student's control. Without teacher support, these students have no hope of succeeding, particularly those students who have barriers keeping them from attending.
18 February 2022	As I await IRB approval, I am reflecting upon my personal motivations in conducting all this research. I know that once I receive the IRB approval, I will be eager to recruit participants. What I will remain focused on is that I am an instrument of the research and not bring my own thoughts into the recruitment, the questioning, nor the results.
29 March 2022	I am conducting my first interview tomorrow – As I prepare, I remain focused on providing the teacher a good environment for her to answer freely – I want to allow a few minutes to just say hello before delving right in to make her comfortable before asking the first icebreaker question. Finger Crossed.
15 April 2022	I have conducted several interviews at this point and have built confidence that my research is going well. I only wish recruitment was going as well as I had hoped. I have about half committed now but am hopeful – I am asking each person to think of any colleagues that may wish to also participate. Before each interview I have made it a routine to think about any personal bias and to stay positive. My participants are busy people and maintaining a positive/upbeat attitude has helped them focus.
5 May 2022	I completed my last interview today. Once I have this interview transcribed and member checked, I will have collected all the data from individual interviews concerning this research study. I have remained keenly aware to maintain a rapport with each participant and to ensure they know that they do not have to answer any of my questions, nor continue to participate if they wish to leave the study. I also meditate in prayer before each interview and ensure that I am as my best – focused on what is being said by each participant.
8 May 2022	I have worked through the process of scheduling four separate focus group this coming week. I am concentrating on how I need to work through each of the established questions while not being in stern control

	of the group. I think if I am too controlling of the group, I will miss the opportunity for open dialogue. I think I will use open mics and tell everyone to engage as if we were sitting in the same room together – I will guide more than orchestrate.
13 May 2022	Through the course of transcribing first individual interviews, and now working through transcribing focus groups, I am ensuring that after I receive the transcription from the recording, I spend the time to listen to the recording and follow what is written. I have found several mistakes and deviations. When that occurs, I try editing the transcript and try not to alter the meaning of what was said. This is a laborious process. Also, with focus groups, there is a need to redact all names and often schools/districts. These extra steps maintain confidentiality and ensure the best final product. This extra step also allows me to have intimate knowledge of the interview by first experiencing it in "real-time" as a researcher, but then again through the transcription process. Each transcript is finally member checked for accuracy.
20 May 2022	I collected all writing prompt from participants. Before I read each, I took the time to think about the individual teacher and cleared my mind of any bias – I also have grown in admiration for how vital teachers are to students and this country. They are pulled in so many different directions – genuinely remarkable people in this group of participants. I have noticed that they all have very loving hearts.
25 May 2022	I placed the last thank you note and gift card in the mail today. I couldn't help but feel proud of the research collected and how happy I was to meet each of the research participants. Regardless of how I felt about each of the participants, it did not affect my decision to use their experiences or to discard their point of view.
15 June 2022	Finalized Chapter 4 – Turned manuscript into Dr. Collins for review. Major Themes Identified answering the three research questions. During theme development, I consciously decided not to "push" the data one way or the other. As themes began to emerge, I saw the opportunity to place them into four "C" categories. These four C's are simply synonyms. For example, communication could just as easily have been the interaction of multiple words describing communication. Compassion started as Showing Love – it then became caring, and finally, to keep all four as nouns, I settled on compassion. The theme's meaning never changed and emerged through the process – only the labeling changed.
20 June 2022	Finalized Chapter 5 – Turned in manuscript to Dr. Collins for review. All Interpretations of Findings, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research are complete. While completing this chapter, I remained focused not to allow any bias into my findings – regardless if I agreed or disagreed with a particular point of view provided by the participants, I made the effort to block that out as I completed the final chapter.

Appendix M: Audit Trail

Date	Events
4/1/21	Selected and Defined a Research Problem for Examination
12/4/21–1/20/22	Emailed the Herculean School District and 18 other districts in northeast and central Alabama's Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, and their executive assistant to obtain permission to conduct research in their school district.
12/18/21	Received permission from the Herculean School District Superintendent to conduct research in their school district.
1/14/22	Received permission from the Spartan School District Superintendent to conduct research in their school district.
2/3/22	Proposal Defense
2/14/22	Initial Submission to IRB for Approval
3/10/22	IRB Returned for Corrections
3/16/22	Returned Corrected Submission to IRB for Approval
4/18–4/26/22	Began recruiting Participants and conducted three pilot tests.
3/30–5/5/22	Individual Interviews
5/9–5/12/22	Focus Groups
3/30–5/13/22	Transcription and Member Checks
5/13–5/20/22	Writing Prompt
5/20–5/25/22	Completed and mailed (w/delivery notification) all thank you notes and gift cards.
3/30–5/20/22	Phenomenological Reduction
3/30–5/31/22	Organization and Analysis of Data
6/1–6/12/22	Development of Narrative and Descriptions of Findings
6/15–6/20/22	Development of Conclusions – Interpretations of Findings, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research
7/2/22	Solicited an APA editor for my final dissertation.