Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of

Spring 2014

Project Reconnect Program: Engaging Truant Adolescents through Pre-Court Diversion

Trevis C. Killen

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Social Work Commons, and the Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons

PROJECT RECONNECT PROGRAM: ENGAGING TRUANT ADOLESCENTS THROUGH

PRE-COURT DIVERSION

by

TREVIS C. KILLEN

(Under The Direction of Kymberly Harris-Drawdy)

ABSTRACT

The current literature on truancy diversion court programs has failed to examine middle and high school truants' perceptions regarding how well truancy diversion court programs improve school attendance and performance. As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine participants' perceptions regarding how well the Project Reconnect Diversion Program empowered their improved school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. The researcher used a case study design to investigate the participants' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants who completed the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program during the 2010-2011 school year. Data were collected through individual interviews and small group meetings.

The Project Reconnect Diversionary Program was found to employ practices that reportedly influenced the participants' school attendance, completion of class assignments, and improved grades. Moreover, the weekly check-in meetings with the social worker were reported to be beneficial and empowering. The findings from this study permitted the researcher to make several recommendations regarding truancy diversion program evaluation as well as middle and high school models for retention and graduation.

INDEX WORDS: Protective Factors, Risk Factors, and Truant

PROJECT RECONNECT PROGRAM: ENGAGING TRUANT ADOLESCENTS THROUGH

PRE-COURT DIVERSION

by

TREVIS C. KILLEN

B.A., Albany State University, 2003

M.S.W., University of Georgia, 2006

Ed.S., University of Georgia, 2007

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

May 2014

PROJECT RECONNECT PROGRAM: ENGAGING TRUANT ADOLESCENTS THROUGH

PRE-COURT DIVERSION

by

TREVIS C. KILLEN

Major Professor:	Kymberly Harris-Drawdy
Committee:	Russell Mays
	Joshua W. Murfree, Jr.

Electronic Version Approved:
May 2014

DEDICATION

I am eternally thankful to God for leading me through this journey, and without him, I would not have succeeded. Through God's everlasting love, grace, mercy, and divine favor I have been tremendously blessed by the people that he has placed in my life to encourage and challenge me along the way. Although my journey was difficult maturing through life without hearing my mother's voice to assure me that I could succeed in whatever endeavor I pursued, God still provided a way to empower me to not give up. As a young man, I learned that God was faithful as he supplied all my needs. Now, my prayer is that God will continue to empower me and bless my professional and personal pursuits.

This dissertation is dedicated to my phenomenal parents and brother. My mother, Ellen Holt Killen, died when I was 22 years old but her legacy continues to live on through me. I am very grateful for the love and sacrifice that she showed to me during her short time on Earth. Today, I would not be the person that I am if she had not exposed me to Christian values and a strong work ethic. To my father, Edward Killen, Jr., I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you for your strong advocacy, encouragement, and advice that you have always offered throughout my life. My father never allowed me to settle for second best and always reminded me to focus on my long-term goals. As for my brother, Edward "Tywan" Killen, I am very blessed to have you in my life. The support and time that you have invested to insuring that my educational needs have been met is heartwarming. Through my life you have been my friend, personal advisor, teacher, and confidant, and I thank you for being dependable. The three of you have tremendously blessed and enriched my life, and wherever I go or whatever I do in life, I shall never forget you all.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the many people, too numerous to mention, who have played an integral part in my success. Surely, I am here today because of their thoughts, prayers, lessons, and struggles paved the way for me. To my deceased family members, Willie Holt, Theresa Holt, and Willie Vonia Holt-Lawson, I am thankful that God placed you in my life. And yes, Granddaddy, Willie Holt, I am still making my mark! Also, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to my Aunt, Sarah Almetta Killen-Rice, for the weekly phone calls and words of encouragement. I would also like to thank Ms. Bettye Rose Williams for the uplifting prayers, bible scriptures, and listening ear that she offered over the years.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my dearest supporters, including my Godmother, Eugene Mack, for the kindness, thoughts, and support that she has given to me throughout my life. Mrs. Gail Tyson, thank you for helping me to develop a passion for scholarly writing, I could not have gotten to this juncture with your candid advice and humor. Additionally, this dissertation is dedicated to my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Tonisha Johnson. The love and support that you have shown to me throughout this scholarly journey has blessed me in more ways than words can express, and my prayer is that God will continue to use you to bless others. I am blessed to have you all in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of my dissertation would not have been possible without my dissertation committee's work, dedication, and willingness to see me through this scholarly journey. The three of you are truly amazing human beings. To Dr. Kymberly Harris-Drawdy, I am appreciative of the time, knowledge, and conversations that you shared with me regarding a population that people sometimes quickly dismiss. Also, thank you for challenging and empowering me to critically think and examine research from a scientist practitioner perspective. To Dr. Russell Mays, thank you for believing in me and supporting me during my tenure at the Georgia Southern University. I found you to be dependable, flexible, and extremely supportive with helping me to reach my goal of completing this dissertation. No matter the situation, you always knew what to say to encourage me, and your advice was always comforting.

To Dr. Joshua Murfree, words cannot begin to express the respect that I have for you, especially considering that you encouraged me to pursue a doctorate degree back in 2002 when I was an undergraduate student at Albany State University. I am appreciative that you agreed to serve on my dissertation committee, and I am blessed to have you as a role model.

My committee members, the three of you are in part responsible for helping me to reach this monumental milestone of completing this dissertation, and I am proud of the work that we have done. I am blessed that you all have touched my life in such as special way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Truancy has been identified as one of the top ten educational problems in the United States and its pervasive effects on students is an early predictor of delinquent behavior (Barrett, Katsiyannis, Willson, & Zhang, 2007). Significantly, inconsistent definitions and reporting practices of truancy have contributed to a robust but diverging body of literature (Reid, 2005). As a result, a true picture of how many students are absent (without permission) on any given school day is difficult to determine considering the lack of uniformity with defining, tracking, and reporting of truancy across the United States. For these reasons, a national prevalence rate of truancy is unknown; however, according to the nationally administered Monitoring the Future Survey, 11% of eighth graders and 16% of tenth graders reported that they had skipped school one or more times within the past four school weeks (Henry, 2007). Moreover, the adverse impact of skipping school has resulted in poor student achievement as 27% of truant eighth and 41% of truant tenth graders reported grades of D or below in Henry's study (2007).

After more than 130 years of compulsory school attendance and a century of research about truancy, a universal definition of truancy still does not exist (Reid, 2005). Considering that numerous definitions have been used to define truancy, most researchers have provided operational definitions for truancy (Reid, 2005). For example, in a study examining the chronological patterns of school attendance and academic performance of urban students identified as truants in the eighth grade, the students were identified as truant if their total number of unexcused absences exceeded 10 or more in a single school year (Spencer, 2009). In Gottfried's (2009) study, an unexcused absence was defined as a student not having a legitimate note upon returning to school, as outlined by the Philadelphia School District's Attendance and

Truancy Office guidelines. On the other hand, an unexcused absence was defined as absent from school without permission, according to local policies and procedures in Haugland, Mounteney, and Skutle's (2010) study. These varying practices of tracking, reporting, and defining unexcused absences from school have made it difficult to accurately ascertain the prevalence of truancy cases in the United States (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hanzan, 2010), given that a student needed to exceed a certain number of unexcused absences to be considered truant.

Attempts to identify truants have been well researched and are intertwined with family factors, student achievement variables, school factors, economic influences, and personal factors (Barrett et al., 2007; Cole et al., 2007; Haugland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2008). These risk factors can significantly impact the educational and psychosocial wellbeing of students. As a result, the phrase *at-risk* is sometimes used to describe students and the environmental characteristics that make them more likely than others to experience failure in school (Heidemann, Rewey, Rodrique, & Zimmerman, 2008). Taken together, the continuum of risk factors that has contributed to truancy provides a broad lens with which to view the numerous influences and correlations that adversely impacts students' abilities to attend school.

At the familial level, Haugland et al. (2010) found that almost one third of the truants in their sample came from single-family homes. While family composition alone cannot automatically determine whether a child will attend school regularly or complete high school, Henry's study (2007) found that 25% of 5,429 truant tenth graders and 15% of 5,684 truant eighth graders reported that their mothers had dropped out of high school. On the other hand, school factors related to the overall climate and culture of schools also have been linked to truancy. For example, 23% of truant tenth graders reported that on most days they did not feel safe at school (Henry, 2007).

The consequences of truancy adversely impact student achievement and economic outcomes. For example, Gottfried (2009) found that students with unexcused absences performed worse on the Stanford Achievement Test-Ninth Edition (SAT 9) in reading and math than did students who had excused absences. Similarly, grades were impacted because of school attendance in Henry's study (2007) as 27% of truant eighth graders and 24% of truant tenth graders reported grades of D or below. When high school students were chronically truant from school and failing classes, they became at-risk for not completing high school. For these reasons, the pathological progression of truancy and academic failure has been a strong predictor for the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school. The attendance rate, for example, in Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson's (2007) study was negatively correlated with the dropout rate. Next to academic achievement, chronic absenteeism had the strongest relationship to students dropping out of school than any other variable in Christle et al.'s (2007) study.

Multifaceted juvenile court diversionary interventions have helped to alleviate the complexity of diverse factors that contribute to truancy, by connecting young people to comprehensive wraparound services (e.g., social services, psychological, individual and family counseling, medical, and mentors) and resources. These interventions were designed to meet the unique needs of the juvenile within their community by addressing the issues that may be contributing to the juvenile's truant behavior. For these reasons, truancy diversionary court programs that reduced unexcused absences encouraged home, school, and community partnerships as interventions to alleviate truancy and promote pro-social behavior (Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006; Richtman, 2007). A distinct feature of multifaceted truancy court diversionary programs was the intense focus on re-engaging students back into the school environment, as well as holding them accountable for their compliance with the intervention. To achieve these goals, multilevel partnerships with social services agencies and

the juvenile court system were employed to address non-academic barriers that impede upon truants' school attendance.

Literature Overview

School attendance is one of the few compulsory requirements in the lives of United States citizens (Provasnik, 2006). Despite that requirement, numerous students have been truant from school on any given day across the United States. The complexities of issues that contribute to truancy have been intertwined along a continuum of psychological, familial, sociological, and school related factors (Barrett et al. 2007; Cole et al. 2007; Haugland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2008). Considering these multifaceted factors, educational leaders should employ research and best practices that will mitigate truancy by strengthening home, school, and community relationships. Consequently, the purpose of this literature review is to examine empirically based research on the topic of truancy and diversionary court interventions for middle and high school truants.

The Meaning of Truancy

In 1642, The General Court of the Massachusetts Bay enacted the first law requiring the education of children (Provasnik, 2006). Since then, school attendance laws have been commonly referred to as compulsory attendance laws, compulsory school laws, or compulsory education laws, with the latter prescribing a particular type of education such as public, private, or home school (Provasnik, 2006). As a result, a particular challenge with the establishment of compulsory education has been that states and local jurisdictions define when a student is truant (Lindstadt, 2005). Given these inconsistencies, a vast but diverging body of literature exists on the topic of non-school attendance (e.g., unexcused absenteeism from school), which has contributed to the lack of agreement on the causes of truancy (Pellegrini, 2007; Reid, 2005). Incongruence in the definition, reporting practices, and the causes of truancy have resulted from

the cross categorical nature of interest in the problem of truancy. As a result, a variety of disciplines such as education, psychology, and criminal justice have published on the topic of truancy and may have used their own discrete definition when describing truancy (Kearney, 2008). Considering these issues, researchers have operationally defined truancy according to their professional discipline's approach to the nature and causes of truancy.

Psychological approaches to truancy have included terms such as school phobia, separation anxiety, school refusal, and school refusal behavior, whereas the criminal justice literature has defined students surpassing of a certain number of unexcused absences from school with legal terms such as truancy and delinquency (Kearney, 2008). This is problematic as the criminal justice terminology for non-school attendance or unexcused absenteeism from school has created a gap in the research because it is contingent upon state and locally defined compulsory school attendance statutes, which makes it more difficult to accurately compare the prevalence rate of truancy across states. As a result, the term truancy has been operationally defined (Reid, 2005). The taxonomy of operationally defined terms and characteristics that are used to describe truancy are problematic considering that the meaning of truancy, evaluation, and replication of interventions is contingent on the applied definition. In view of these issues, researchers and scientist practitioners have encountered a significant challenge when analyzing research on truancy, given the vast spectrum of diverging theories, models, and perspectives which have been used to describe truancy across disciplines.

To date, a universal definition for truancy has not been identified. Cole et al. (2007) defined truancy as an unexcused absence from school. In Cole's et al. (2007) study, 103 randomly selected students were considered truant if they had accrued 15 or more unexcused absences during the previous year. However, Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006) defined truancy according to a local statute, which included unexcused absences and tardies. Based on this

criterion, Huddleston and Shoenfelt's sample consisted of 74 students who had accumulated a combination of nine unexcused absences or tardies, and were referred to the Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP). In contrast, Giacomazzi et al.'s (2006) study defined chronic truancy as students who had missed more than 10% of the school-year. Barrett's et al. (2007) study considered a student truant after three consecutive or a total of five unexcused absences, according to the South Carolina statute. While multiple attempts were made to define truancy (e.g., from state to state and study to study), no universal standard of measure has been identified to determine who is actually truant.

<div align="center">**Risk Factors**</div>

Research (Barrett et al. 2007; Cole et al., 2007; Haugland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2008) has found that truancy is a complex problem that is typically correlated with (a) family factors such as parental supervision, domestic violence, substance abuse, frequent mobility, and parent's educational attainment; (b) school factors such as school climate, school size, curricular issues, safety, bullying, and poor attendance policies; (c) economic influences to include single parent homes, student employment, and high mobility; and, (d) student variables like substance abuse, mental and physical health issues, delinquent peer group, poor self-esteem, and limited knowledge of compulsory attendance laws. These risk factors have been shown to significantly impact the wellbeing of students, as researchers demonstrated that the pathological progression of truancy was correlated with delinquency and high school dropout (Barrett et al., 2007; Christle et al., 2007; Haughland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007). Thus, the phrase *at-risk* has been used sometimes in research to denote the adverse impact that environmental characteristics have had on student achievement (Heidemann, Rewey, Rodrique, & Zimmerman, 2008).

Family factors

The lack of having two parents in the home has been linked with truancy. For example, in Giacomazzi et al.'s (2006) study, 65% of the truants referred to the Ada County Attendance Court lived in single parent homes. Henry's (2007) study reported that 34% of tenth grade truants lived with neither mom nor dad. By contrast, Henry's (2007) study found that 27.6% of truant tenth graders lived with their fathers. Truancy may also be more prevalent in some families, as Giacomazzi et al. (2006) discovered that one-third of 191 truancy court referrals involved multiple sibling referrals. Considering that truants' siblings are also at-risk for truancy due to their family environment, non-truant students were proactively referred to the TCDP when a sibling had been referred to that program (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). Towards that end, Hopko and Hunt (2009) found that school truancy was associated with less family cohesion and fewer household rules and parameters as measured by the Family Environmental Scale Real Form Control subscale and reported by rural youth. These diverse components of family factors that place students at-risk for truancy could include issues related to a lack of parent supervision and guidance, parent's varied educational priorities, or lack of familiarity with school compulsory attendance laws.

Economic factors

Truancy is associated with numerous risk behaviors and economic factors that affect the wellbeing of students and their families. South Carolinian juveniles with an annual family income of less than $15,000 were more likely to have initial referrals to juvenile court for truancy than were juveniles from higher socioeconomic families whose initial referrals were usually for other offenses (Barrett et al., 2007). However, Hopko and Hunt (2009) found that the mother's socioeconomic status and educational level was significantly correlated with their child's truant behavior, and less educated mothers (e.g., high school dropouts) were more likely

to have truant children than college educated mothers. These findings parallel Henry's (2007) study as 15% of eighth grade truants and 25% of tenth grade truants reported that their mothers were high school dropouts. Considering these results, the pathological link between truancy, parental educational level, and income suggests that truants and their families are more likely to experience economic hardship and conflict.

School factors

School factors have included issues related to the school climate and culture, school size, curricular issues, safety, bullying, and poor attendance policies. These factors have contributed to students' non-school attendance as Gastic (2008) found a relationship between bullying and truancy. In Gastic's (2008) study, 22% of tenth grade bullying victims in the United States were excessively absent and 15% were regularly late to school. Bullying was frequently mentioned as a reason for non-attendance among a focus group of young people in Wales (Reid, 2005). In Henry's (2007) study, 21% of truant eighth graders and 23% of truant tenth graders reported feeling unsafe at school on most days. Considering these results, the impact of a school's climate has had an enormous influence on students' decisions to skip or attend school regularly.

Student achievement variables

Truancy has adversely impacted the educational attainment of students, given the compounded and accumulated lost opportunities of classroom instructional time. For example, a chronological review of the report cards of 42 students who were referred to the Truancy Court Prevention Project found that high rates of absenteeism from school were commonly associated with retention and social promotion, given that the students had not mastered the curricular objectives. As a result, Spencer (2009) questioned the adverse practice of using retention and social promotion as an intervention for absenteeism. The short and long term impacts of truancy have been shown to impact student achievement. Standardized test scores were also impacted by

truancy. According to Gottfried (2009), second through fourth grade students with 100% unexcused absences performed lower on the Stanford Achievement Test-Ninth Edition in math, than did students with 100% excused absences. Some teachers have reported that absences from school have hindered students' academic performance due to their fractured exposure to the curriculum and learning continuity (Davidson et al., 2008).

Personal and Psychological Factors

The spectrum of intrapersonal and psychological traits that influenced students to attend or skip school include intelligence, resilient temperament, values, peer affiliation, disability status, psychological diagnosis, and self-esteem. Truants were at-risk for participating in risky behaviors; for example, 76% of eighth and tenth grade truants in the Haughland et al. (2010) study reported being introduced to alcohol by age 13. The findings that corroborated Henry's (2007) study were 26% of truant eighth and tenth graders reported alcohol use one or more times in the month prior to taking the survey. Among this group, 37% of the eighth graders and 31% of the tenth graders respectively reported being intoxicated one or more times in the past month, compared to 85% of the sample in the Haughland et al. (2010) study who reported drunkenness. By contrast, truants in the intervention group in Cole et al.'s (2007) study reported frequent health and emotional problems. Peer group affiliation has also been linked with truancy, as Henry and Huizinga's (2007) study found that involvement with delinquent peers and school performance predicted the variance in truancy. These findings suggest that personal and psychological factors may contribute to truant behavior among students.

Protective Factors

School and peer factors

The numerous personal and environmental challenges that have contributed to truancy can also hinder the academic, social, and economic wellbeing of students, but protective factors

can promote positive developmental outcomes for truants (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2006). Protective factors were characterized as the interplay of environmental, social, and/or academic factors that promoted positive outcomes in context to risk exposure (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2006). Using self-reports of 610 nine and thirteen year-old students, such as students who performed well in school, participated in sports, and held high educational aspirations, who completed the Denver Youth Survey, Henry and Huizinga (2007) matched their responses according to school-related risk and protective factors. Their findings revealed positive teaching practices and student-teacher relationships in the students' school. Also, within this sample, Henry and Huizinga (2007) found that students who associated with conventional peers (e.g., friends who obeyed the rules and/or involved in school activities) reported fewer days of truancy. A strong association between participation in sports was also linked with decreased truancy in Hopko and Hunt's (2009) study of 367 Appalachian youth in grades 9 through 12. Among this group, decreased participation in sports was linked to a greater likelihood of skipping school, whereas participation in athletics was a protective factor that inspired students to attend and excel in school.

Family and community factors

Family-involvement and community partnerships have been reported as protective factors that can reduce the risk factors that contribute to students' truancy. As Sheldon (2007) found that overall, 69 schools using the National Network of Partnerships (NNPS) program in Ohio were more likely to experience an increase in student attendance than the control sample of non-NNPS schools. Given these results, the implementation of school, family, and community partnership programs could benefit students who are at-risk for truancy, by helping students to improve their school attendance (Sheldon, 2007).

Interventions to Reduce Truancy

Multifaceted truancy interventions employing juvenile court diversionary programs, school-based mentorship, mediation approaches, school-wide assessment of attendance policies, along with social service agency collaboration have produced favorable outcomes in alleviating the risk factors that impact truants (Cole et al, 2007; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Giacomazzi, Mueller, & Stoddard, 2006; Greenbaum, Massey, & Yampolskaya, 2006; Lindstadt, 2005; Richtman, 2007; Sheldon, 2007). Cole et al. (2007), using a diverse sample of 103 high school students, studied the effect of mentored relationships with teachers and participation in school-health services on absenteeism and school disengagement. For example, four to five students were randomly assigned to one teacher-mentor, who was responsible for establishing a rapport with each mentee to foster self-development and school engagement. Among this group, students in the teacher-mentored relationship and school health based clinic had significantly fewer absences than did students in the control group. Considering these results, Cole et al. (2007) asserted that the mentorship dynamic had significantly influenced the students to attend school by countering their feelings of hopelessness and the social pressure to drop out.

A community-based court intervention's goal of reducing truancy was evaluated in the Fantuzzo et al. (2005) study. Among this group, truants referred to the community-based family court had a significantly lower rate of absenteeism than the other two truant groups 30-60 days post court disposition (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). In contrast, Giacomazzi et al. (2006) found that 77% of the students' school attendance had improved within one to three months after their initial truancy hearing. Moreover, Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006), compared attendance and academic records of 74 elementary, middle, and high students who had participated in the Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP) to a control group of 74 non-truant students. Results of the analysis for elementary and middle school students demonstrated that the rate of

unexcused absences decreased significantly during participation in the TCDP (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Truancy has been shown to be a complex problem that affects schools and school districts across the United States. The multifaceted complexities of truancy have been interconnected along a continuum of familial factors, economic influences, school factors, student achievement variables, and personal factors, along with inconsistent definitions and reporting practices that differ by school district, state, and academic discipline. With inconsistent definitions of truancy, a national prevalence rate for truancy has not been able to be reported; as a result, truancy in this study was defined according to a Middle Georgia school district's truancy protocol. Truancy has been, however, a problem that twenty-first century schools must address in order to meet the unique needs of truant students. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* requires high schools to report attendance rates as well as to increase graduation completion rates. Consequently, measures that will assist school personnel in reducing truancy must be developed or discovered and evaluated.

Purpose of the Study

Truancy is not only an important issue to meet federal and state requirements but the ramifications of truancy have a wide range of impacts on students and communities. Educational leaders must develop and advocate for programs that help students remain in school. Truancy diversion court programs have provided a holistic approach bringing together the resources of the school, families, and the community to positively affect student attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. While post-intervention outcomes of truancy diversion court programs have yielded mixed results, the current literature failed to examine middle and high school truants' perceptions regarding how well truancy diversion court programs improved school attendance,

compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. As a result, the purpose

of this study was to examine the Project Reconnect Diversion Program and participants'

perceptions regarding how well the program has empowered their improved school attendance,

compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments among truant sixth

through ninth grade students, who completed the Program during the 2010-2011 school year, in a

suburban Middle Georgia school district. Four questions guided this research:

1. How do participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceive the program's
   effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of
   class assignments?

2. What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project
   Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

3. What are participants' perceptions about how the Project Reconnect Workshop
   disseminates school district policy for excused absences?

4. What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in
   meetings with their assigned social worker?

Significance of the Study

Truancy has been a problem that affects schools and school districts across the United

States. Therefore, this study evaluated truant middle and high school students' perceptions

regarding how well the Project Reconnect Program has empowered their improved school

attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. Knowing

the effects to which pre-court diversion truancy intervention outcomes were sustained could

affect decision-making and the allocation of funds as well as school attendance policies and

procedures. This line of research is an essential step in increasing student achievement and

decreasing truancy among truant middle and high school students. The results of this study offer

insight as to how schools can improve school attendance and truancy diversion programs by proactively developing a model for retention and graduation.

Theoretical Framework

In the ecology of human development theory, Bronfenbrenner (1977) explained the interplay between the person and his or her environment as an ever-changing ecosystem where all aspects of a person's environment were connected to and dependent on all other parts (e.g., individual, family system, community, etc.), wherein a change in one part would affect another system. The essential foci of Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory examined how the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem create ever-changing conditions that respond to the individual and environmental context. Considering that research has found that truancy is typically correlated with family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables, the ecology of human development theory helps to explain the underlying behavior and social environment in which truancy occurs. Consequently, Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory provided a lens to examine truants' functioning while examining his or her environmental context.

Methods

This evaluative study employed qualitative research methods to answer the research questions. More specifically, a qualitative case study design was used to explore participants' perceptions of the program's goals to inspire truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. In addition, the participants' perceptions about school attendance were analyzed via qualitative research methods. These datasets were collected via individual interviews and small group meetings, which, in turn, were utilized to fulfill the objectives of this research. By employing a qualitative research design, a more in-depth understanding of the thoughts, values, and experiences of the

participants was ascertained through the identification of relationships among the data (Horejsi & Sheafor, 2011).

Sample and Participants

A sample of eight truant middle and high school students who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year was utilized to satisfy the objectives of this research. According to a suburban Middle Georgia school district's attendance policy, sixty-eight truant middle and high school students who accrued eight or more unexcused absences were eligible to participate in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. As a result, the names of the eight participants were obtained via the school district's Infinite Campus and truancy court databases. The truancy court database included the dates and names of truant middle and high school students who agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year, and the Infinite Campus database included students contact and demographic information, along with school names. However, to maintain the eight participants' confidentiality, each subject was randomly assigned a number of one through eight by the researcher. The findings of this study were reported as aggregated data, including the school name, which will only be referenced as a middle school or high school. To acquire these data, the researcher submitted a research proposal to the study school district's director of professional learning, after obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval (IRB) of Georgia Southern University.

Two small groups comprised of three to four middle or high school truants who agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year were used to elicit information on the effectiveness of the program. After obtaining IRB approval of Georgia Southern University and permission from the school district, along with the parental consent and minor's assent forms, the individual interviews and small group interviews were

conducted by the researcher. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to select the participants.

The qualitative data collected during the interviews and focus groups could assist educational administrators and school social workers in determining the usefulness of the program and gauge the program's success in satisfying the needs of the participants. The information gathered from the small group will also provide truants with a voice about opportunities to improve the program. A methodologist assisted the researcher in developing the researcher's guide, which was used during the interviews and small group. The researcher's guide consisted of a series of semi-structured questions and probes, which was used to obtain additional information on truants' perspectives towards the program. The questions were aligned with the research questions and extensive truancy literature. Face validity and efficacy of the semi-structured interview questions were established through a pilot study using two truant students from the sample who were not used as participants in the study. Data from the interviews and small group were analyzed and interpreted to elicit information on the truants' perceptions regarding whether or not the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program motivated them to attend school, comply with school rules, and complete class assignments.

Background

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was a 30 to 180-day multidimensional truancy intervention for truant middle and high school students under the age of sixteen who had accumulated eight or more unexcused absences during the 2010-2011 school year. The objective of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program was to decrease truancy and increase graduation rates by re-acclimating students to school. To achieve these goals, multiagency partnerships with the local juvenile court, magistrate court, sheriff's office, and a Middle Georgia School District were established. For example, all juvenile truancy warrant applications were submitted to the sheriff's office by the school district's social services department. Then, the sheriff's office

forwarded the truancy warrant application to the juvenile court for processing and, simultaneously, filed a truancy warrant application with the magistrate court for the truant's parent or guardian. Finally, the juvenile court and magistrate court mailed letters informing the parents and truants of their respective court dates.

The assistant district attorney and school social worker or social worker assistant from the school district explained the Georgia Compulsory Attendance Law, the legal consequences of truancy and the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program at the time when the truants reported to juvenile court. Students were then presented with an option to complete the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program or to appear before the juvenile court judge for truancy. For juveniles and parents who agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program, the school social worker or social worker assistant provided a Project Reconnect Diversionary folder, along with the Truancy Rules agreement to be signed. The Truancy Rules agreement outlined the terms and conditions of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program.

Truants who agreed to the terms and conditions of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program were required to attend a two-hour pre-court diversion workshop, and were monitored for 30 days by a school social worker or social worker assistant. During that period, the truant's attendance, behavior, academics, and 16 hours of required community service were monitored. More specifically, this meant that truants could not: (1) accrue additional unexcused absences, (2) receive disciplinary infractions, or (3) fail to submit classwork or homework assignments. These variables were tracked in the Project Reconnect Diversion folder, which included four three-page forms, along with community service supervisor information, and log sheets. Each form consisted of a three-block grid that was labeled attendance, academics, and attitude. Seven rows and columns were in each block, along with the date and seven class period headings. The

student's teachers initialed the forms according to the respective period in which they provided classroom instruction to the student.

The truant's assigned school social worker or social worker assistant reviewed the Project Reconnect Diversionary folder weekly with the student. If the terms of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program were violated, the school social worker or social worker assistant would notify the juvenile court judge. With the terms of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program agreement, the truant's initial truancy warrant application is valid for 180 days. As a result, the truant's non-compliance can be reported to the juvenile court judge by a school social worker or social worker assistant anytime during the 180 days. Additionally, out-of-school suspensions would result in increased hours of community service; one hour for every hour that the student has been suspended from school.

Data Analysis

Participants' responses from the interviews and small groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Next, it was necessary to read the transcriptions and develop coding domains by constructing core ideas, and developing categories to describe consistencies across the responses (Gavin, 2009). Interpretation and analysis of these data were evaluated through a comparative case study. This technique offered a means of describing multiple variables of potential importance of the participants' perspectives and experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Limitations

This study was delimited to reviewing five components of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program: encouraging school attendance, compliance with school rules, completion of class assignments, the weekly check-in meetings with participants' assigned social worker, and the dissemination of school district policy for excused absences during the Project

Reconnect Workshop. The interviews and small group were delimited to one meeting in which data were gathered from eight middle and high school students who participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Another limitation was that only data from the 2010-2011 school year were used. By contrast, the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was a limitation given that data were collected from a suburban Middle Georgia School District. Participants' responses in the focus group were a limitation that might have been influenced by verbal or non-verbal communication of members in the group. In addition, the Middle Georgia school district keeps students' archived attendance records for two school years.

Another limitation was that the researcher referred middle and high school truants from the suburban Middle Georgia school district to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Moreover, the researcher was employed in the study district (e.g., suburban Middle Georgia school district) where the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was implemented during the 2010-2011 school year. Thus, the researcher had a background with the participants as a school social worker. Due to these issues, the researcher employed the peer examination strategy to minimize research bias and increase reliability. According to Merriam (2009), peer examination involves asking a colleague who is either familiar with the research or new to the topic to scan some of the raw data and assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data.

Definition of Key Terms

Protective Factors – the dynamic interplay of environmental, social or academic factors that
promote positive outcomes in context of risk exposure (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley,
2006), given family characteristics, socioeconomic status, scholastic achievement,
extracurricular activities, peer affiliation, and the parent's educational level.

Risk Factors – environmental characteristics that predict poor developmental, academic, social
or individual outcomes (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2006)

Truant – any child subject to compulsory attendance who has accrued more than the legally

acceptable number of unexcused absences for their jurisdiction during the school

calendar year (Student Attendance Code, 2007).

Summary

Truancy has been shown to be a symptom of a larger problem in which factors such as

familial dysfunction, juvenile delinquency, and inadequate school cultures tend to coexist.

Besides these risk factors, truants' educational plight was worsened by inconsistent definitions

and reporting practices that have been used to describe their non-school attendance. Researchers

from the fields of education, psychology, and criminal justice have also contributed to the

truancy dilemma by using dissimilar definitions for activities and experiences that were all

considered truancy. Considering these issues, the replication of truancy studies is sometimes

impractical. As a result, the true national truancy prevalence rate remains unknown. Truants,

therefore, are further deprived and placed at-risk for academic failure, coupled with a host of

externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

As an attempt to mitigate the risk factors that compromise the educational attainment of

truants, three salient gaps within the literature on truancy should be addressed. First, a common

definition or taxonomy that describes truants' behavior must be devised. A second conceptual

gap in the literature showed that studies of diversionary court have predominately focused on the

quantitative outcomes (e.g., unexcused vs. excused school absences) of truancy interventions and

absenteeism. As a result, little is known from the viewpoints of truant middle and high school

students about what makes truancy diversion court programs successful or unsuccessful. To

address this third gap in the literature, the researcher employed a qualitative research design to

evaluate the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. By employing a qualitative approach, the

researcher acquired a better understanding of the program's impact or lack thereof on the lives of

the truant middle and high school participants. If these issues are not diligently explored, many

more middle and high school truants will become victims to the pathological progression of

academic, social, and economic disengagement or even drop out of school.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The extant literature on truancy was broad and varied. While school attendance is one of the few compulsory requirements in the lives of United States citizens (Provasnik, 2006), there was no definitive definition of the act of truancy. To better understand the historical and current meaning of truancy, the first two sections of this literature review contextualized the history of compulsory school attendance and the meaning of truancy. With a better understanding of the range of meanings of truancy we can more clearly delineate the impact of truancy on the lives of our students and the causes of truancy (e.g., family, economics, school, and personal and psychological). Finally, this literature review concluded with a review of strategies focused on reducing truancy with a focus on the multifaceted juvenile court truancy diversionary programs.

Search Process

To conduct this review, the Georgia Southern University online library system was used to search the Georgia Library Learning Online (GALILEO) and Inter-Library Loan (ILLiad) database to obtain books and journals. The search criteria were limited to documents published during the last three decades and used journal articles as the primary point of reference. The key search descriptors used in all searches were: truancy, compulsory school attendance, at-risk, and juvenile court diversion program.

Ecology of Human Development Theory

The ecology of human development theory is a comprehensive model that can be applied to the study of truancy considering that school attendance is influenced by environmental factors that promote or inhibit students' daily school attendance. This is particularly seen in truancy as the ecology of human development theory seeks to explain the interplay and reciprocal

relationship between organisms (e.g., truants) and their environment (Constable, Flynn, & McDonald, 2002). With this theory, there are four topological environments in which organisms function, including the microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). A major aim of the theory is that it focuses on how humans adapt to ever-changing environments throughout the life span, as well as the immediate settings and larger social contexts in which the changes occur (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Thus, the ecology of human development theory recognizes the consequences of transactions between the person and environment (Constable et al., 2002), where each person is viewed as an inseparable part of the various social systems (e.g., school, home, neighborhood, peer group, etc.) within which he or she functions (Dupper, 2003).

The Ecological Environment

The microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem describe the environments where transactions occur among people and social systems (Horejsi & Sheafor, 2011). The mircosystem is described as the complex relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting such as the home or school, containing that person (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The micro-level focuses on the individual and their most intimate interactions (Horejsi & Sheafor, 2011); and this level focuses on the individual's needs, problems, and strengths (Kirst-Ashman & Zastrow, 2004). However, the mesosystem, also known as the mezzo-level, comprises the interrelationships among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in their life; for example, an American 12 year old student's mesosystem might include interactions among family, school, and peer group (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Kirst-Ashman and Zastrow (2004) noted that the distinction between the microsystem (individual) and mesosystem (small group) is sometimes difficult to differentiate. Bronfenbrenner (1977) also acknowledged that difficulty and asserted that a mesosystem is a system of microsystem.

Nevertheless, a mesosystem is any small group including family, work groups, and other social groups (Kirst-Ashman & Zastrow, 2004). By contrast, macrosystem refers to institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the educational, legal, economic conditions, social, and political systems of which microsystems and mesosystems are the concert manifestations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macro-level affects people's overall access to resources and quality of life; as a result, macro interventions focus on improving the social context in which people live (Kirst-Ashman & Zastrow, 2004).

Truancy and the Ecological Environment

The ecology of human development theory is of particular relevance to the study of truancy, given that its unique focus on the person-in-environment could be employed to assess the reciprocal interactions of truants and environmental factors. This prospective provides a broad conceptualization of students' problems and expands potential targets of intervention that could be employed to alleviate risk factors (Dupper, 2003). The ecology model recognizes that there are specific, enduring, and transient relationships among individuals, families, other groups, institutions, and society; and, that the transactions among these systems that affect human behavior and functioning (Constable et al., 2002). Rather than focusing on the truant as the problem, the ecology model provides a lens to assess the entire ecosystem and intervene at the most appropriate points in the system to effect desired change (Constable et al., 2002). Another benefit of using the ecology model is that it permits educators to address issues by moving across boundaries in dealing with the transactions between the client system and school ecosystem (Constable et al., 2002). Thus, the ecology of human development theory could be employed to address the psychological, sociological, familial, economic, and school related variables that are associated with truancy.

Origins and Defining of Truancy

History

On June 14, 1642, the Puritan elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the first compulsory education law in American History (Katz, 1976). The passage of the first compulsory education law was a paradigm shift, as early Puritan parents and masters living in the wilderness had a moral obligation to educate their children and apprentices as good Christians (Katz, 1976). Failure to do so was viewed as a serious threat to the religious, moral, and economic wellbeing of the commonwealth. Despite that, the records from that period do not reveal how frequently (or severely) parents were punished for failure to comply with compulsory attendance (Katz, 1976).

In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed another compulsory attendance law, which required communities with 50-100 households to provide a teacher to instruct children in reading and writing, and communities of 100 or more households were required to establish grammar schools (Katz, 1976). Consequently, Massachusetts Bay Colony's compulsory attendance laws established two prerogatives of the state, the right to enforce minimal standards for the education of children and the right to compel the establishment of educational provisions such as teachers and schools (Katz, 1976).

The social disorder inflicted by the Civil War and the rapid technological growth that ensued created compulsion that was used in many aspects of American life to secure stability and to forge a new sense of manhood and nationhood (Burgess, 1976). As a result, following the Civil War, a heightened belief in the centrality of schooling was viewed as a way to reunite the nation amid the social and technological ferment of post-Civil War growth in the United States (Burgess, 1976). During this period, the growth of cities and industrial establishments were dramatically transformed as waves of immigrants poured onto the American shores (Katz, 1976).

Thus, the momentum for publicly controlled common schools gradually emerged as the strains of social diversity and urban chaos increased (Katz, 1976). In the public's view, the publicly controlled common schools would unite Christian morality with democratic patriotism, reduce crime, and assimilate immigrants and transform them into productive American citizens (Katz, 1976).

After more than 200 years of passing the first compulsory education law, Massachusetts enacted its first compulsory school attendance law, which required parents to send their children to a public school for at least twelve weeks, six of which had to be consecutive (Katz, 1976). A majority of states and territories had passed compulsory attendance laws by 1890 (Katz, 1976), but many of the compulsory attendance laws were symbolic and unenforced (Provasnik, 2006).

Between 1890 and 1930, stronger compulsory attendance laws were passed which finally made the laws effective (Provasnik, 2006). The passage of stronger compulsory attendance laws resulted from a coalition of concerned citizens who lobbied state legislators to amend existing compulsory attendance laws as a mechanism against child labor (Provasnik, 2006). As a result, compulsory attendance laws were transformed into a complex network of interrelated legal rules that not only required school attendance, but the hiring of truancy officers and a host of child labor regulations (Katz, 1976). By 1920, school attendance had increased following the stronger truancy laws, as more than 78% of students eligible for enrollment in public schools were enrolled and 90.6% of the school population that was not legally eligible for employment was attending regularly (Katz, 1976). By 1930, the percentage of youth aged 14 to 17 enrolled in public high schools had increased to 47%, compared to 1% in 1880. During this time, the mean legal age for leaving school had risen to 16 years and 3 months, from 14 years and 5 months in 1900. Further, thirty-one of the forty-eight states required school attendance until age 16, while

one state required it until age 17, and five required it until age 18; and, eight states required

compulsory attendance until age 14 (Katz, 1976).

As the establishment of truancy laws progressed, the professional qualifications of

truancy officers were expanded and regularized. Through this and the expansion of attendance

offices in schools, truancy prevention became a systematic part of the school environment (Katz,

1976). As a means to ensure compliance, state aid became tied to the average daily attendance of

students, as a result, attendance departments produced regular data on truancy including the

percentage of pupils present at school, the number of parent and students who were prosecuted

for truancy, and the number of children who were committed to correctional institutions (Katz,

1976).

Georgia Compulsory Attendance Law

Currently, every state has compulsory education requiring children between certain ages

to attend school and failure to comply might be a criminal violation (LaMorte, 2005). The

landmark United States Supreme Court decision, Pierce vs. Society of Sisters, 1925, affirmed the

doctrine of compulsory school attendance and it established the role of parochial and private

schools in satisfying the State's demand that children must receive schooling (LaMorte, 2005).

The Court's decision also legitimated the state's authority to mandate: (1) that all children be

educated; (2) what all children should or should not learn and study; (3) who may teach children;

and, (4) it excludes the power to prescribe which institution(s) shall deliver the curriculum

(Provasnik, 2006).

Six years prior to the Pierce vs. Society of Sisters case, Georgia passed its first

compulsory school attendance law which required children between the ages of eight and

fourteen to attend school for four months of the year (Nesbit, 1976). This law, however, allowed

for multiple exemptions such as: the completion of the fourth grade where the condition of

poverty required the child to support their family; exemption if the parent was unable to provide books or clothing; mental or physical incapacity; residing more than three miles from school; and, consideration for seasonal labor (Nesbit, 1976). In 1919, the Georgia Compulsory Attendance School Law amendment required six months of school attendance along with the completion of acquiring a seventh grade education. Many of the previous exemptions were removed in the 1919 amendment (Nesbit, 1976). The 1919 amendment was updated with a stronger State compulsory attendance school law in 1945, in which the school term increased to 175 days and the age of compulsory school attendance was expanded requiring children to attend school between their seventh and sixteenth birthdays (Nesbit, 1976). Shortly thereafter, Georgia's Child Labor Act of 1946 passed, prohibiting employment of children younger than fourteen years old, as well as employment in hazardous occupations and working at night was prohibited for children under sixteen; however, work exemptions still existed under the Act (Nesbit, 1976).

Georgia Code Section 20-2-690.1 currently requires mandatory attendance in a public, private, or home school program for all children between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays. Under this Code, parents, guardians, or any person residing within the state of Georgia and having control of a child or children during the ages of mandatory attendance are required to enroll and send their child(ren) to a public school, private school, or home school. This Code recognizes unexcused and excused absences as the only two categories of absences for school attendance (Student Attendance Code, 2007). For example, a truant student in Georgia is categorized as any child subject to compulsory attendance who has accrued five or more unexcused absences during the school calendar year, while excused absences are legitimate according to local and State guidelines (Student Attendance Code, 2007).

The Meaning of Truancy

While the first compulsory attendance law was written in 1642, unfortunately a clear definition was not established as part of this law (Provasnik, 2006). Since then, no universal definition or standard measure for truancy has been adopted. Due to these definitional problems, states and jurisdictions broadly differ in their basis and measures for determining when a student is truant (Lindstadt, 2005). In the research literature, most investigators using the term provide operational definitions since the meaning of the term often varies by location and discipline (Reid, 2005). As a result, one of the inherent challenges when considering truancy is to understand correctly the meaning and definition of the terms (Reid, 2005), given that various types of truancy and school absenteeism are denoted in the literature. Moreover, Kearney (2008) asserted that examination of the different perspectives on the topic of problematic school attendance has resulted in poor comparability across publications, policies, assessments, and intervention protocols.

Psychological Definitions of Truancy

A significant challenge faced in interpreting the truancy literature is a lack of common definition (Lindstadt, 2005). Of particular difficulty is distinguishing between truancy and absenteeism, or indeed discerning whether there is indeed any difference between absenteeism and truancy (Jennison, Hightower, Lawther, & Lawrence, 2011). The psychological literature has historically referred to extended non-school attendance as school refusal, school refusal behavior, school phobia, and separation anxiety (Pellegrini, 2007; Kearney, 2008). Further, research conducted by Pellegrini (2007) illustrated that the terms school phobia and school refusal are used in psychological research to underpin the behavior and experience of absenteeism. For example, school phobia can result in fear-based absenteeism, which is caused by a specific stimulus, whereas school refusal is an anxiety-based absenteeism resulting from

emotional distress. Some researchers, however, argue that the diagnosis of separation anxiety and school phobia should be used to improve the effectiveness of intervention, while the term school refusal should be applied to describe the student's lack of school attendance (Pellegrini, 2007).

Criminal Justice Definition of Truancy

Criminal justice approaches to absenteeism from school concentrate on rule breaking behavior, systemic factors, and legal interventions (Kearney, 2008). The criminal justice literature has historically referred to extended non-school attendance as truancy and delinquency (Kearney, 2008). For example, the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice categories a truant as a student between the ages of 6-17 who has accrued three consecutive or a total of five unlawful unexcused absences (Barrett et al., 2007). These truants and their parents or guardians may be required to appear in court for truancy and the judge could order the child to attend school, and the child could be declared as delinquent if the absences are deemed beyond the control or knowledge of the parent or guardian (Barrett et al., 2007). Moreover, criminal justice approaches to extended non-school attendance have influenced educational approaches to truancy, especially considering that school district attendance protocols rely on legal definitions of truancy and perfunctory referrals to juvenile justice systems (Kearney, 2008). Taken as a whole, researchers from the psychological, criminal justice, and educational disciplines have produced a vast but diverging body of terminology on the topic of truancy; thus, contributing to the poor comparability across publications and uncoordinated approaches for resolving the problem of truancy (Kearny, 2008). These issues create a significant gap and challenge in the research on truancy when attempting to interpret the results of truancy interventions, attendance data, and publications on school attendance.

School District Definition of Truancy

Despite the absence of a precise definition, researchers on the topic truancy continue to operationally report, categorize, and define students' non-school attendance. For example, when selecting participants for truancy studies, some researchers use school district definitions or state compulsory attendance guidelines. As Barrett's et al. (2007) study considered a student truant after three consecutive unexcused absences or a total of five unexcused absences, which was based on South Carolina's compulsory attendance guidelines for unexcused absences. Under the South Carolina statute, a child between the ages of six to seventeen years old was considered truant after accruing three consecutive or a total of five unexcused absences, whereas a habitual truant was a twelve to seventeen year student old who failed to comply with a truancy intervention plan and had accumulated two or more additional absences. By contrast, a chronic truant (twelve to seventeen year old) student continued to accumulate absences beyond the habitual truant mark (Barrett et al., 2007). In Gottfried's (2009) study, guidelines from the Attendance and Truancy Office headquarters in the Philadelphia School District was employed to determine who was truant. According to the Philadelphia School District attendance guidelines, an unexcused absence occurs for the lack of submitting a note upon the student's return to school; however, some notes are not accepted as excused absences. For example, unexcused absences with notes that include conditions such as parent's illness, unemployment, family problems, and non-school related activities are deemed as unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2009).

Researchers' Definition of Truancy

Some research designs simply adopt the state or district definition of truancy. Other researchers, however, have created variations on these definitions using percentages or student self-reports.

Total Number or Percentage

In some truancy studies, researchers consider a specific number of unexcused absences or a total percentage of the school-year that the student missed. The criteria used to select the three groups of truants in Fantuzzo et al.'s (2005) study included having a history of 25 or more unexcused absences in the prior school-year as well as an unexcused absence rate of 14% or higher during the concurrent year of the study. On the other hand, according to the Kentucky compulsory school attendance law, school administrators referred students to the TCDP if they had accumulated a combination of nine unexcused absences and tardies (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). Further, students with less than the statutory number of unexcused absences and tardies were referred to the TCDP program when their sibling had been referred to the TCDP program (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). However, more than two hundred chronically truant elementary students who missed more than 10% of the school year (e.g., approximately eighteen absences) were referred to the Ada County Attendance Program (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). In Idaho, a habitual truant was denoted as a student whose parents failed to comply with State Code 33-202 (e.g., mandatory compulsory attendance) or violated the local school board's attendance regulations (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). By comparison, the inclusion criteria used to select the 108 participants in Haugland's et al. (2010) study considered whether the student had a history of truancy, had skipped five days, or thirty hours or more in the previous six months of school without permission from parents or a guardian.

The student selection process that was used to acquire participants for Cole's et al. (2007) study included: (1) a history of fifteen or more unexcused absences during the previous school-year; (2) enrollment in target high school; and, (3) an age of sixteen or younger through the school-year. Based on these criteria, 103 participants were distributed across the intervention group, control group, and the unable-to-enroll group. By contrast, truant behavior and grade

point averages were obtained for the participants in Hope and Hunt's (2009) study; truant behavior, for example, was defined as the total number of unexcused absences for the entire 2004-2005 school-year.

Student Self-reports

Researchers have used student self-reports as a measure to inquire about the prevalence of truancy during the current school-year. During 2006, 1,000 eleventh grade students from a Mid-Western school district in the United States completed an in-school anonymous survey, which inquired about drug use while skipping school. In the survey, students were asked whether or not they had participated in the following types of truancy: (1) skipped just a class, (2) skipped more than one class but not a full school day, and (3) skipped the entire school (Henry, 2010). Similarly, students reported the number of times they had skipped school without an excuse since the previous interview in Henry, Huizinga, and Thornberry's (2009) study. In this longitudinal study, the researchers using data from Rochester Youth Development study, examined the effect of truancy on the initiation of marijuana use via six-month intervals (e.g., sometimes longer or shorter periods of time lapsed in between the interviews) interviews with the participants and their caregivers. As a result, the number of school days that elapsed between the prior and current date of the interviews was calculated; then the number of times the student reported being truant was divided by the number of possible school days (Henry et al., 2009). According to Henry and Thornberry's (2010) most recent publication on the longitudinal study presented by Henry et al.(2009), the researchers noted that the students reported the number of times they skipped school, not the number of days they skipped school.

In Henry and Huizinga's (2007) study, students who were nine and eleven years old at the onset of the study, respectively self-reported their truancy when they turned nine and fifteen years old. These participants were interviewed during the first few months of the following

school-year and were asked to report on their behavior form January 1st to December 31st of the previous school-year, reporting the number of times that they had skipped school without a legitimate excuse (Henry and Huizinga, 2007). By multiplying the number of times truant by the average number of days skipped per incident, Henry and Huizinga (2007) constructed an approximate of the number days that each student was truant from school. Considering the diverging tracking and reporting practices of truancy, Henry (2007) surveyed a national sample of 5,684 eighth graders and 5,429 tenth graders via the Monitoring the Future questionnaire. This nationally representative sample self-reported about participating in truant behavior within the past four weeks of completing the questionnaire, along with demographic and family characteristics, school-related factors, and drug use (Henry, 2007).

Potential Causes of Truancy

Effective prevention of truancy requires a thorough understanding of the characteristics that describe truants as well as the environmental factors that put students at-risk for truancy (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Research has found that truancy is caused by multiple out-of-school and in-school factors (Barrett et al. 2007; Cole et al., 2007; Haugland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2008). These factors can be divided into seven categories including family factors, school factors, economic factors, student achievement variables, personal and psychological factors (Lindstadt, 2005), peer associations, and peer pressure.

Family Factors

Family factors influencing truancy may include home environment, living situation, lack of parental supervision, or the parent's level of educational attainment. The absence of having two parents in the home environment has been linked with truancy, as Giacomazzi (2006) found that 65% of the students referred to the Ada County Attendance Court lived in single parent

homes. Giacomazzi (2006) conducted a thorough review of student referral sheets for the 114

students who appeared in the Ada County Attendance Court during its first two years of routine

operation. The findings from Giacomazzi's (2006) study show that the mean number of absences

during the school-year was 15. According to Henry's (2007) study, 14% of truant eighth graders

and 28% of truant tenth graders self-reported on the Monitoring the Future survey that they lived

in a single female headed household, while 13% of truant eighth graders and 19% of the truant

tenth graders reported living with a single father. By contrast, 34% of students who reported

being truant on the Monitoring the Future survey indicated that they lived with neither mom nor

dad, while 20% of the truant tenth graders reported living in the home with both mom and dad.

These findings diverge with Henry's (2010) research as 64% survey truants self-reported living

at home with both biological parents. In this study, 1,000 eleventh grade students from four high

schools in a large Mid-Western school district in the United States were surveyed via a needs

assessment, and demographic variables such as family structures were included. Finally,

Haugland's et al. (2010) research examined alcohol use and alcohol-related problems among a

sample of 108 truant participants in Bergen, Norway. These participants completed a

comprehensive questionnaire and 8% reported that they mostly lived with their father, while over

a third reported living with both parents all the time.

Lack of Parental Supervision

Despite living in a single or two parent home, some educators believe that students are

primarily absent from school due to parents leaving home before their child goes to school, along

with poor parenting skills (Reid, 2008). These data were collected from three groups of educators

(e.g., middle or senior managers, education welfare officers, and home-school liaison officers) in

the United Kingdom who attended professional development workshops on attendance. Each of

the three groups participated in a rotating carousel approach where they were asked to brainstorm

via a flipchart on five specific questions relating to truancy. For example, one of the questions asked the participants to list the reasons why students miss school in the building where they teach.

Although Reid's (2008) research found that students were primarily truant due to parents departing from home prior to their child's departure, Correa's (2011) research diverges as a weak correlation was found between living situation and attendance. Correa's (2011) study explored whether absenteeism is linked to external factors, such as family problems, living situations, substance abuse, community involvement, and school factors. Twenty participants, ranging in ages 8 to 16, completed the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment, which clinically measured students' outcomes in domains such as life functioning, child strengths, caregiver strengths, substance abuse, and so on (Correa, 2011). Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship among the aforementioned domains along with the students' average monthly attendance data. The results found that students with moderate to severe problems in the family environment did not have significantly higher rates of absenteeism than students who did not report problems in the family environment (Correa, 2011). However, the weak correlation between living situation and attendance is cautioned, given that Correa's (2011) sample only consisted of twenty participants.

Parent's Educational Attainment

The parent's level of educational attainment might impact truancy, as Hopoko and Hunt's (2009) study found that truancy was associated with having a less educated mother, less structure in the home environment, and less participation in sports. These findings were obtained from students' reports on the Family Environments Scale Real Form, Youth Self-Report, and the Religious Commitment Inventory. 367 ninth through twelfth grade adolescents in rural Tennessee completed these scales. Similarly, Henry's (2007) study found that the parent's level

of education was correlated with truancy, as 15% of truant eight graders and 25% of truant tenth graders reported that mothers dropped out of high school and did not receive a diploma.

School Factors

The school factors that influence truancy include safety and bullying. These factors can contribute to students' non-school attendance as Henry and Huizinga (2007) found that students who felt unsafe at school or reported gangs in their school reported more days of truancy than students who participated in sports, held high educational aspirations, and performed well in school. In this study, the relationship between students' experience at school and involvement with truancy was explored, as students reported the number of times that they were truant along with thirteen peer related variables. Moreover, the issue of feeling unsafe at school converges with Henry's (2007) study given that 14% of truant eighth graders and 20% of truant tenth graders reported feeling unsafe at school on some days. Among this group, 21% of truant eighth graders and 23% of truant tenth graders who were truant within the past four weeks of completing the Monitoring the Future survey reported feeling unsafe on most days.

Researchers have found an association between bullying and truancy. For example, educators and students cited bullying as a common reason for non-school attendance (Reid, 2009). The findings from Reid's (2009) study show that educators are concerned about the perceived increase in physical, verbal, and cyber bullying and its relationship to non-school attendance. These findings parallel the data that was reported by the students in the focus groups, as bullying was a common theme and major reason for non-school attendance. Additionally, Gastic (2008) examined the relationship between being bullied and having truancy and disciplinary problems via a nationally representative sample of 1,578 tenth graders in the United States. Among this sample, students were asked to indicate how many times they had been bullied during the previous semester, and they were asked to describe the frequency level of

school truancy or disciplinary problems that they displayed during the previous semester. According to Gastic's (2008) findings, 22% of victims reported they were excessively absent from class, and thus had a 58% greater chance than non-victims of being excessively absent from school.

Economic Factors

Socioeconomic factors are commonly correlated with truancy. Barrett (2007) tracked 12, 464 juveniles who were initially referred to the South Carolina juvenile justice system due to truancy and then examined their second referral to the juvenile system. The participants were referred to the juvenile system after accruing three consecutive or a total of five unexcused absences, according to the South Carolina compulsory attendance statute. According to Barrett's (2007) findings, juveniles from families making less than $15,000 a year were more likely to be referred for truancy, compared to juveniles from higher income families who were more likely to be referred due to other non-truancy related offenses. The association between socioeconomic level and truancy was also found in Reid's (2009) study, as schools with more students from disadvantaged families and socioeconomic backgrounds had higher numbers of parents taken to court for their children's truancy. Spencer's (2009) study corroborates the association between truancy and socioeconomic status by showing that free lunch recipients and students with behavior problems had the largest correlations to the total number of unexcused absences.

<center>Achievement and Truancy</center>

Truancy can weaken a student's academic engagement. To illustrate, 27% of truant eighth and 41% of truant tenth graders reported grades of D or below on the Monitoring Future survey (Henry, 2007). These findings converge with Henry's (2010) study given that truant students reported lower academic performance than their non-truant peers on an anonymous in-school survey. Among this sample, 9% of the truants were more likely to have been held back a

grade, compared to 4% of the non-truant students. By comparison, Spencer (2009) found that 80% of participants averaged 27 days absent from school in grades K-8 and had been retained or promoted at least once by the eighth grade. Also, Spencer (2009) examined the chronological patterns of attendance and academic performance via a cumulative review of educational records such as attendance data, reports cards, work samples, and other assessments of urban students who were identified as truant in the eighth grade. Spencer's (2009) study addressed a gap in the literature by examining the chronological perspective of the role that school experience has on the development of truant behavior in upper elementary, middle school, and high school. This study did, however, fail to make a distinction between excused and unexcused absences; as a result, participants were selected if their total number of absences exceeded more than 10 excused or unexcused absences in a single school-year, according to the state guidelines.

The literature on school attendance has not focused on the types of absences (e.g., excused vs. unexcused) and school performance; thus, Gottfried's (2009) study examined the relationship between types of absences and academic performance. More specifically, Gottfried (2009) analyzed the performance of five cohorts of elementary school students on the Stanford Achievement Test-Ninth Edition (SAT 9) reading and math sections, along with the total number of excused and unexcused absences. In this study, students with 100% excused absences performed higher on the SAT 9 reading exam, as compared to students with 100% unexcused absences. Gottfried (2009) also found, on average, students with 100% unexcused absences performed lower on the reading exam. Towards that end, some truants in Davidson et al.'s (2008) study acknowledged the difficulty that they experienced upon returning back to school, given that they had missed tests, and did not understand the examination questions. As a result, some teachers believed that the truant students would experience gaps in their knowledge, causing them problems that would affect their learning later in the school-year. In turn, some

sixth and ninth grade teachers in Davidson et al.'s (2008) study associated students' absenteeism to marginal test scores.

Students with a higher proportion of unexcused absences are at-risk of experiencing the ultimate form of academic disengagement, which is dropping out of high school. To illustrate, Davidson's et al. (2008) study examined the views of teachers about the causes and effects of absence, and the secondary school teachers in the sample believed that truancy was pathological. That is, students get into the habit of not attending school, thus it becomes increasingly difficult for them to return to school and catch up on the work they missed. According to Christle et al.'s (2007) findings, academic achievement and the rate of absenteeism showed the strongest relationship to dropout. In this study, a purposive sample of 20 high schools with the highest dropout rates was compared to 20 high schools with this lowest dropout rates. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to identify the school-level variables that showed the greatest relationship to dropout rates. Given that dropping out of high school is the ultimate consequence of truancy, teachers in the Davidson et al. (2008) study reported that the major effect of absences from school was on the students' academic achievement. This report corroborates the findings in Giacomazzi's study as 95% of the 114 referrals to the Ada County Attendance included statements in which school officials noted that students' grades had dropped due to attendance problems. Considering this, primary school teachers in Davidson et al.'s (2008) study stressed that absence broke the continuity of learning, and that absences invariably meant that important topics covered in the full and structured curriculum would be missed.

Personal and Psychological Factors

The personal and psychological factors that coexist with truancy include drug and alcohol abuse and mental health difficulties in middle and high school students (Cole et al., 2007; Correa

et al., 2011; Haugland, 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry & Thornberry, 2009; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Jennison et al., 2011; Reid, 2008).

Alcohol and Drug Use

Henry (2010) explored if drug use actually takes place while students are truant from school. For example, 1,000 participants were surveyed via an anonymous in-school survey to examine whether: (1) drug use was a common behavior that students engaged in while skipping; (2) did drug use vary as a function of the severity of truancy; and, (3) whether certain types of drugs were more commonly used while skipping school. Among this group, 56% of the students reported engaging in some form of truancy (e.g., skipping one or more classes, or skipping the entire school day), and 45% of the students who skipped one or more full days indicated that they drank alcohol while truant. By comparison, 50% of the students in Henry's (2010) study reported that they used marijuana while truant compared to 27% of the students who reported that they used other drugs while truant. These findings contrast Henry et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study were truancy preceded marijuana use among 969 seventh and eighth grade students enrolled in the Rochester, New York public school system. Among this group, 6% of the students reported trying marijuana before skipping school, while 68% of the students indicated that they started skipping school before starting to use marijuana.

By administering the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment to 20 students (aged eight to sixteen) referred to the Youth Advocate Programs, Correa's et al. (2011) study revealed a weak correlation between the severity of substance abuse, school attendance, and tardiness. According to Henry's et al. (2007) study, truancy was a significant predictor of the initiation of marijuana use among 13 to 15 year olds during the following six month period; the higher the increased frequency of truancy, the higher the odds of starting to use marijuana. By contrast, 35% of truant eighth graders and 37.2% of truant tenth graders who

were truant within the past four weeks indicated that they had used marijuana one or more times in the past month, while 36% and 34% indicated that they had smoked cigarettes one or more times in the past month.

Underage alcohol consumption and intoxication have also been associated with truancy (Cole et al., 2007; Haugland, 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Thornberry, 2009). Specifically, higher levels of truancy were related to more frequent drinking, drunkenness, and alcohol-related problems among one hundred and seven 13-16 year participants in Haugland's (2010) study, which included 50 girls and 57 boys. In this study, 76% of the participants reported being introduced to alcohol by age 13, while one-third of them reported weekly beer drinking. These findings parallel with Henry's (2007) study were 26% of truant eighth grade and 26% of truant tenth grade who were truant within the past four weeks students reported alcohol use one or more times in the past month, compared to 37% of truant eighth graders and 31% of truant tenth graders who indicated that they were intoxicated one or more times in the past month. Moreover, 85% of the truants in Haugland's (2010) study reported that they had been drunk at some point. These findings parallel with Henry and Thornberry's (2009) study where a student's involvement in truancy and involvement in alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs was examined. The results from Henry and Thornberry's (2009) study suggest that truancy has an inter-individual and intra-individual effect, considering that students who engaged in more truancy reported higher levels of substance abuse. In addition, individual increases in truancy were associated with individual increases in substance abuse.

Mental Health

Students with mental health problems may be at increased risk for truancy; for example, in Cole's et al. (2007) study, 29 truants in the intervention group reported frequent health and emotional problems on a health questionnaire. The most frequent reports from this group

included prolonged depression, sleep problems, suicidal thoughts, and anger management problems. As a result, Cole et al. (2007) examined whether students receiving school-based health services and mentored relationships from within their own school would affect youth problems of high absenteeism and school disengagement. The findings show that students in the intervention group had significantly fewer absences than the control or unable to enroll group. Another study, consisting of 367 students (e.g., ninth through twelfth grade) in rural Eastern Tennessee, found that truancy was related to nine variables, including depression, withdrawal, somatic complaints, alcohol and drug use on the Youth Self-Report survey (Hopko & Hunt, 2009).

Peer Associations

Henry and Huizinga's (2007) research illustrated that truancy is predicted by involvement with delinquent peers and poor school performance. In this study, the researchers investigated the relationship between truancy and escalation of substance use during adolescence and explored mechanisms of this relationship. To address these questions, 1,000 seventh and eighth grade students reported the number of times that they used alcohol and other drugs, along with the number of times they had skipped school since the previous (e.g., six month) interview without their parents' permission. Towards this end, Henry and Huizinga (2007) found that risky time spent with friends is a mediator of the relationship between escalation of truancy and escalation of substance, considering that 44% of the effect of change in truancy on the change in substance use was explained by changes in risky time spent with friends. Another study investigating the relative predictive strength of academic performance, religiosity, environmental factors, internalizing problems, and pro-social overt behavior in predicting high school truancy found that truancy was associated with increased delinquent peer associations on the Youth Self-Report survey (Hopko & Hunt, 2009). Finally, students who associated with delinquent peers,

felt unsafe at school and reported that there were gangs in their school reported more days of truancy than their non-truant peers (Henry and Huizinga, 2007). As a result, the largest effect attributed to school performance was association with delinquent peers, as 21% of the variance of truancy was predicted by delinquent peer association; however, involvement with delinquent peers was a less robust predictor of truancy among students who performed well in school.

Peer Pressure

According to Reid's (2008) findings, peer pressure along with it being cool to skip school were cited by students, parents, educators, and professionals in the United Kingdom as two of the nine real inter-related causes of students' non-attendance at school. These findings diverge from Davidson's et al. (2008) study where the majority of students with good attendance reported that they distance themselves from truants, due to their belief that truants were unlikely to do well in school. Among this group, truants were also associated with troublemakers. In addition to these findings, teachers in Davidson's et al. (2008) study reported that on the return of the absentees first day to school, they usually do not fit in or understand the work, and have trouble making and keeping friends.

<div align="center">

Intervention Strategies

</div>

The numerous personal and environmental challenges that contribute to truancy can hinder the academic, social, and economic wellbeing of students. Nonetheless, protective factors can promote positive outcomes in the context of risk exposure such as family characteristics, socioeconomic status, scholastic achievement, extracurricular activities, peer affiliation, and the parent's educational level (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2006). As such, research has illustrated that the protective factors that decrease the likelihood of truancy are family, school, individual, and community factors (Barry, Chaney, & Chaney, 2011; Henry, 2007; Greenbaum et al., 2006; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Marvul, 2012; Sheldon, 2007; Zhang, 2003).

Parents

By using secondary data from the Monitoring the Future survey data, Barry et al. (2011) found that the parent's level of education attainment significantly impacted truant and alcohol-related behavior on the outcome variable of educational aspiration. In this study, Barry et al. (2011) examined whether recent alcohol use and truancy impacted students' educational aspirations among a nationally representative sample of eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade students in the United States. The participants in the sample completed the confidential questionnaires during the regularly scheduled class times; however, the senior respondents were asked to provide their name and mailing address on separate forms for mailing the follow-up surveys (Barry et al., 2011). In total, 10,833 respondents' completed questionnaires were included in the analyses, and the demographic covariates show that as the mother's and father's educational attainment increased, reported educational aspirations for the student increased. In another study using the Monitoring the Future questionnaire, 7% of truant eighth graders and 12% of truant tenth graders self-reported that their mother had graduated from high school, compared to 7% of truant eighth and 12% tenth graders who reported that their father had graduated from college (Henry, 2007). Among this sample, truants who self-reported that their parent graduate from college were less likely to be truant than their peers. Previous research by Zhang (2003) in the United Kingdom investigated parental attitude towards education and parenting skills via a mail survey among 90 education welfare practitioners and 98 parents of children living in poverty. Over 61% of the parents in Zhang's (2003) study had children with attendance problems; yet, the parents believed that parental attitude and parenting skills are vital to good school attendance. These parents did, however, acknowledge that correct parental attitude and good parenting skills might not correct their situation; as a result, several of the parents said that appropriate

professional help is equally as important in achieving their children's good attendance records (Zhang, 2003).

School Engagement

Research illustrates that truancy decreases when students receive educational instruction in a supportive, engaging and enriching school climate; for example, Marvul (2012) found that school attendance and attitude toward education increased among students who participated in a five month school program that included sports participation, a moral character class, and attendance monitoring. The purpose of Marvul's (2012) study was to develop and design a program to improve attendance and eliminate acts of truancy committed by at-risk minority boys in an alternative high school. As a result, the researcher randomly assigned 20 truant males to the intervention group and control group. The sample was approximately 50% percent black and 50% Hispanic, along with a small number of Native Americans and students of mixed race. The intervention group (1) received daily phone calls home before school, (2) participated in a moral issues class, and (3) participated on club football and basketball teams, while the control group participated in a personal fitness and health issues class and a computer research class. Both groups completed the Student Engagement Survey, which measures cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional engagement. According to Marvul's (2012) findings, students in the intervention group averaged 7.35 absences in the post-intervention period, whereas the control group averaged 21.85 absences. Moreover, there was a 17% difference of the variance between the intervention and control groups' attitudes towards education, where the control showed more positive attitudes toward education. These findings suggest that as educational expectations increase, absenteeism declines (Marvul, 2012).

Some participants in the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness Program (GEAR UP) experienced improvement in academic performance, social competence, and reduction in

disciplinary infractions. The GEAR UP intervention was designed to improve academic performance, decrease behavior problems, and reduce truancy and absenteeism among at-risk and low achieving high school students in Florida. This study examined the effect of academic, social, and behavioral components of the GEAR UP program, and investigated outcomes for at-risk students whose participation in the program varied by the amount of time they spent in the GEAR UP activities (Greenbaum et al., 2006). The sample consisted of 447 students between the ages of 13 and 18 years old; for example, 101 participated in the academic activities (tutoring and academic and career counseling), 21 in behavior related activities (e.g., counseling and conflict resolution), and 38 in social activities (e.g., field trips and sports). This study also consisted of a three-group comparison (for each category of three activities in the GEAR UP program), which included the no participation group, low participation group, and high participation group. Towards this end, a comparative analysis of the participants and non-participants students revealed that students who used behavior related counseling showed a significant increase in unexcused absences (Greenbaum et al., 2006). By contrast, the average number of disciplinary referrals for students in the participation group who were exposed to social activities decreased at a statistically significant rate, compared to students in non-participant group. Despite that, no statistically significant interaction effects were detected when the participant and non-participant groups were compared on the number of days absent. These findings converge with Hopko and Hunt's (2009) study in which decreased participation in sports was linked to a greater likelihood of skipping school.

Community Partnerships

Family-involvement and community partnerships are protective factors that can decrease the onset of environmental risk factors and behaviors that contribute to truancy. These partnerships recognize that achieving and maintaining school attendance is a complex but

attainable function. As Sheldon's (2007) study found that student attendance improved an average of .5% in 69 schools using the National Network of Partnerships (NNPS) program in Ohio, during the 2000-2001 school-year. More specifically, the researcher examined whether implementing the NNPS program influenced student attendance in 69 elementary schools in Ohio (Sheldon, 2007). The NNPS schools implemented six types of involvement (e.g., parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decisions making, and collaborating) with the community to establish comprehensive school, family, and community partnerships (Sheldon, 2007). By contrast, the control sample included 69 non-NNPS elementary schools, which were matched with 69 elementary schools that implemented the NNPS model. Analysis of the NNPS data also revealed that the average rates of daily attendance for elementary schools were sustained into the following school-year, and student performance on the reading and mathematics achievement test was correlated highly with daily attendance (Sheldon, 2007). Moreover, schools that implemented the NNPS partnership program experience higher levels of student attendance than the non-NNPS schools (Sheldon, 2007).

Juvenile Court Truancy Diversionary Programs

The juvenile court system was established to differentiate between delinquent acts committed by children and criminal adults; as a result, juvenile courts offer youth diversion, decriminalization, due process, and deinstitutionalization (Lindstadt, 2005). Truancy court is regarded as a type of diversion program in some jurisdictions, especially considering that the intervention is targeted at changing student attendance behavior without having to resort the prescribed consequence of formal sanctions (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). For example, Evans, Hendricks, McKinley, and Sale's (2010) study using197 middle school students who participated in a semester-long Truancy Court diversion program in Springfield, Missouri examined the

effect of the program's influence on truancy rates, discipline offenses, and child school attachment in four middle schools.

Participants' parents in Evans' et al. (2010) study had to attend all weekly sessions during a 10-12 week period with the Truancy Court Team, support the recommendations of the Truancy Court Team, and provide documentation explaining their child's school absences. The judge reviewed the student's progress reports and attendance weekly during court, and the family advocate was responsible for coordinating and monitoring social service resources for the families. A five-minute school attachment survey was (administered before and after the truancy court) used to assess outcomes of the program, along with the participants' discipline and attendance records. The results of the complete attendance data was based on 185 cases, which yielded a pre-truancy court intervention average attendance rate of 83.7%, with attendance for some students as low as 69% (Evans, et al., 2010). Given these percentages, the researchers decided to divide the students into three groups (e.g., mild, moderate, and severe) Evans et al. (2010) found that levels of attendance during the following semester were not significantly improved over the baseline semester; however, students with severe truancy at the baseline experienced the most improvement during the intervention than others groups. The results also found that the increases gained during the intervention were sustained for one semester, as well as a statistically significant decrease in discipline offenses from the semester before the intervention to the semester after truancy court (Evans et al., 2010).

Giacomazzi's et al. (2006) study using 114 fourth through sixth graders, examined the process and short-term impact of the Ada County Attendance Court diversionary proceedings on student attendance habits. The Ada County Attendance Court was established to increase student attendance rates and academic performance through non-punitive judicial intervention, while linking students with community resources as an effort to promote pro-social behavior among at-

risk youth (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). Multiple methods such as face-to-face interviews and reviews of students' attendance records from the previous and current school-year were used to assess the Ada County Attendance Court program's process and outcomes (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). The results indicated school attendance had improved among 77% of the 114 students who appeared in the court between one and three months after the initial hearing, while school personnel reported students' grades had improved in 73% of the cases (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). Fantuzzo et al.'s (2005) findings corroborated these results by showing truancy levels as significantly low among participants in a community-based court intervention program. In this study, a quasi-experimental design was used to evaluate the attendance outcomes of a diverse group including 567 elementary, middle, and high school students who met the court and school district's criteria for a referral to truancy court (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Participants represented three distinct groups of truants which included truants referred to: (1) the multidimensional, community-based family court know as Project START, (2) the traditional, one-dimensional family court, and (3) non-referred. Each of these groups contained 189 students, and the selection criteria included a history of 25 or more absences from the previous year and an unexcused absence rate of 14% or higher during the current year (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). The results raveled that truants referred to the community-based court continued to demonstrate an absence rate significantly lower than the baseline, during the 30-60 days post-court intervention (Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

Research by Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006) supports previous studies in which diversionary court interventions have decreased truancy among participants (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al. 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). The aim of Huddleston and Shoenfelt's (2006) study was to examine whether the Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP) positively impacted the attendance and academic performance of the

participants in the program. The academic and attendance records of 74 elementary, middle, and high school students who participated in the TCDP intervention and the control group consisted of 74 students from the same grade levels (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). Analysis of the participants' post-intervention rate of unexcused absences was significantly lower than their pre-TCDP rate (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). The rate of unexcused absences and unexcused tardies decreased among middle school students, during participation in TCDP; however, among middle school students the rate of unexcused absences and unexcused tardies subsequent to TCDP participation relapsed toward the pre-TCDP rate (Huddleston and Shoenfelt, 2006). Considering these findings, Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006) suggested attendance behavior needed to be closely monitored to ensure that any improved attendance is maintained and that TCDP participants are continuously supported for their improved attendance. Further, results of the analyses of GPA data revealed that TCDP students significantly improved their grades during participation in TCDP and maintained the improved performance in the subsequent post-TCDP semester (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006).

Summary

The Puritan elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the first compulsory education law in American history on June 14, 1642 (Katz, 1976). After more than 200 years of passing the first compulsory school attendance law, Massachusetts made history in 1852 as the first state to mandate compulsory attendance for children between the ages of 8 and 14 years old (Katz, 1976). To date, every state has compulsory attendance laws that require children between certain ages to attend public, private, or home school program and failure to comply could result in criminal violation (La Morte, 2005). The Supreme Court of the United States legitimated the authority of states to enforce compulsory attendance laws via the landmark Pierce vs. Society of Sisters case (Provasnik, 2006). This landmark case gave states the legal authority to mandate that

all children be educated in a public, private, or home school program. In Georgia, students between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays are required to attend school; and, the State only recognizes two categories of absences from school that are unexcused and excused (Georgia Code, Section 20-2-690.1). According to State guidelines, a truant student is any child subject to compulsory attendance who has accrued five or more unexcused absences during the current school-year (Georgia Code, Section 20-2-690.1).

Determining the actual prevalence of students who are truant is difficult, given that states and school districts vary in how they define, report, and measure truancy (Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2005). Furthermore, complicating any attempt to report and compare statistics on truancy are the operational definitions that researchers use when measuring truancy. Despite that, psychological approaches to describe school absenteeism primarily focus on the underpinning of proximal and distal factors that contribute to the student's non-attendance (Kearny, 2008). As a result, terms such as school phobia, school refusal, separation anxiety, and school refusal behavior are used in psychological research to describe the underlying behavior and experiences of absenteeism (Kearny, 2008). The criminal justice literature has commonly referred to extended non-school attendance as truancy and delinquency, which focuses on rural breaking behavior (Kearny, 2008). As a result, researchers from the psychological and criminal justice disciplines have published a vast but diverging body of terminology on the topic of truancy; thus, contributing to the uncoordinated approaches for resolving truancy (Kearney, 2008). These issues create a significant gap and challenge when attempting to interpret the results of truancy interventions, attendance data, and publications on school attendance.

The diverse reporting measures that are used to select participants in truancy studies is problematic, considering that diverse factors are frequently used as selection criteria, including state or local compulsory attendance guidelines, or a specific number or percentage of the

school-year. For example, participant's in Barrett's et al. (2007) study were considered truant for having accrued three consecutive or a total of five unexcused absences, according to the South Carolina compulsory attendance statue, whereas students who had missed more than 10% of the school-year were included in the Ada County Attendance Program. However, some truancy studies required participants to self-report their truant behavior; for example, participants in Henry's (2007) study denoted their truancy within four weeks of completing the Monitoring the Future survey.

Truancy is attributed to multiple out-of-school and in-school factors (Barrett et al., 2007), including family factors, school factors, economic factors, student achievement variables, and personal and psychological factors (Lindstadt, 2005). These risk factors can significantly impact the academic and psychosocial wellbeing of students. For example, students living in single parent homes comprised 65% of the truants referred to the Ada County Attendance Court (Giacomazzi, 2006), while 27% of truant tenth graders reported living in a single female headed home in Henry's (2007) study. School factors such as bullying also influence truancy as Gastic (2008) found that bullying victims had a 58% greater odd of being excessively absent from school than non-victims. A majority of the educators in Reed's (2009) study were concerned about bullying and its relationship to non-school attendance. On the contrary, research has found an association between truancy and socioeconomic level, as juveniles from families making less than $15,000 a year were more likely to be referred for truancy, than juveniles from higher income families who were more likely to be referred to juvenile court for non-truancy related offenses (Barrett, 2007). Moreover the pathological progression of truancy can contribute to lower academic performance or dropping out of high school (Davidson et al., 2008; Gottfried, 2009; Henry, 2007; Spencer, 2009). Researchers have also found that truancy coexists with substance abuse and mental health difficulties (Correa et al., 2011; Cole et al., 2007; Jennison et

al., 2011; Haugland, 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry & Thornberry, 2009; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Reid, 2008).

Protective factors on the family, school, and community levels can alleviate the outcomes of environmental risk factors (Barry et al., 2011; Henry, 2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Marvul, 2012; Sheldon, 2007; Zhang, 2003). At the family level, protective factors include the parent's level of educational attainment, parenting skills, and parental attitude towards education (Barry et al., 2011; Henry, 2007, Zhang, 2003). Truancy also decreases when students receive educational instruction in a supportive and enrich school climate (Marvul, 2012); additionally, students who participate in sports and extracurricular, report close relationships with teachers, and associate with peers who are academically connected to the school culture are more likely to attend school (Greenbaum, 2006; Hopko & Hunt, 2009). Family-involvement and community partnerships with schools help to increase school attendance and student achievement (Sheldon, 2007).

Effective truancy intervention requires a collaborative multimodal approach that involves a combination of community stakeholders such as schools, juvenile courts, parents, and social services agencies (Evans et al., 2010), especially considering that students are truant for a myriad of psychological, sociological, familial, and school related factors. Research has shown that multifaceted juvenile court diversion programs that link students with community resources were successful in decreasing truancy (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al. 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). The aim of truancy court diversion programs is to change students' attendance behavior without having to resort to prescribed consequence of formal sanctions (Giacomazzi et al., 2006). The outcomes of post-diversion court programs have yielded mixed results were truancy decreased during the implementation of the intervention and subsequent semester (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al. 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006;

Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). For example, the rate of unexcused absences and unexcused tardies decreased among middle school students during participation in the TCDP program; however, the rate of unexcused absences and unexcused tardies subsequent to TCDP participation relapsed toward the pre-TCDP rate among middle school students (Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). Considering the initial decrease of unexcused absences and unexcused tardies among the middle school students, Huddle and Shoenfelt (2006) asserted that recently improved attendance behavior needed to be continuously monitored and supported to ensure that the gains are sustained.

The ecology of human development theory offers a comprehensive focus to the study of truancy, given that its person-in-environment model could be employed to evaluate the reciprocal interventions of truants and environmental factors. A major aim of the theory is that it focuses on how humans adapt to ever-changing environments as well as the contexts in which the changes occur (Brofenbrenner, 1977). The microsystems, mesosystem, and macrosystem are terms used to describe the immediate settings where transactions occur among people and social systems (Horejsi & Sheafor, 2011). The micro-level focuses on the individual's needs, problems, and strengths, while the mesosystem includes small groups such as family, work groups, and other social groups (Kirst-Ashman & Zastrow, 2004). However, the macro-levels refer to institutional patterns of culture or subculture (Brofenbrenner, 1977). As a result, the ecology model is of particular relevance to the study of truancy, given its acknowledgment that transient relationships (e.g., among individuals, families, other groups, institutions, and society) affect human behavior and functioning (Constable et al., 2002). This model does not focus on the truant as the problem, instead it offers a lens to evaluate the entire ecosystem and intervenes at the most appropriate points in the system (Constable et al., 2002).

CHAPTER 3

Method

Truancy has been identified as one of the top ten educational problems in the United

States (Katsiyannis et al., 2007). Surveys showed that 11% of eighth graders and 16% of tenth

graders reported skipping school one or more times within the last four weeks (Henry, 2007).

Research has found that truancy is a complex problem that is intertwined with a range of

comorbid occurrences including familial, psychological, socioeconomic, and academic factors

(Barrett et al. 2007; Cole et al., 2007; Haugland et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga,

2007; Hopko & Hunt, 2009; Lindstadt, 2005; Reid, 2008). Given the range of issues truancy

represents when detected, it is important that a holistic intervention be selected which has the

potential to help students with a range of hurdles they might be facing. Diversion truancy court

programs have been implemented as a multi-faceted solution to decreasing truancy among

juveniles, by linking them with community resources and social services. Diversion truancy

court programs utilize multiple levels of family, community and school intervention to impact

students' truancy, including school-based mentorship, mediation approaches, school-wide

assessment of attendance polices, and wraparound services (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al.

2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006).

In general, diversion truancy court programs have been shown to be effective; for

example, an evaluation of the Springfield Truancy Court program considered the program's

impact on students' grade point averages, school attachment, and discipline offense (Evans et al.,

2010). Using a sample of 567 truant elementary, middle and high school students, Fantuzzo et al.

(2005) evaluated the 30- and 60-day post-implementation of the Project START program for

participants who were referred to the traditional court, community based court, or did not receive

a court referral. In this quasi-experimental study, Fantuzzo et al. (2005) found that truants

referred to the community-based court had a significantly lower standard rate of absenteeism

than the other two samples. In a study assessing whether the Truancy Court Diversion Program

(TCDP) positively impacted the attendance and academic performance of 74 elementary, middle

and junior high students, Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006) found that the rate of unexcused

absences among junior high students relapsed after their completion of the TCDP program. By

contrast, Giacomazzi et al. (2006) assessed the short-term impact of the Ada County Attendance

Court program's proceedings on 28 elementary students, and 84% of survived school

administrators indicated that the program had positively impacted students' attendance.

The current research on truancy diversion court programs has exclusively focused on

evaluating post-intervention perceptions of multifaceted interventions, which were implemented

to alleviate a multitude of factors that contribute to truancy (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al.,

2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). While the reported outcomes of

truancy diversion court programs were largely effective (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al.,

2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006), the degrees of evidence

supporting the success of truancy diversion court programs are debatable. Considering that, the

current literature on truancy diversion court programs focuses on post-intervention outcomes

such as attendance, grades and behavior, and failed to examine middle and high school

participants' perceptions regarding how well truancy diversion court programs improve school

attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. To answer

these questions, future research must include qualitative designs that assess middle and high

school students' thoughts, values, and experiences about truancy diversion court programs.

Through investigating the middle and high school students' perspectives, we gain a better

understanding as to how schools can be proactive in developing a truancy diversion program for

middle and high school students. This line of research represented an essential step in increasing student achievement and decreasing truancy among truant middle and high school students. By doing so, the results offer insight as to how schools can proactively develop a model for retention and graduation.

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was a truancy diversion intervention designed to deter students who are twelve to fifteen-years old from accruing unexcused absences from school. The main goals of the Project Reconnect Diversion were to decrease truancy among middle and high school students by encouraging them to attend school, comply with school rules, and complete class assignments. This study included students who participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion during the 2010-2011 school year. The purpose of the study was to explore program completers' perceptions of the program's goals such as to encourage truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments.

The proceeding sections of this chapter describe the method that was used to conduct the study, including the research questions that framed the context of this study. Also included is an explanation of the research design, description of the study's site selection, the selection of participants, and discussion of the interview process that was used to collect the data. This was followed by a discussion about the data analysis procedures that were employed to analyze the data including reporting the data, controlling for researcher bias, and ethical considerations. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations, followed by a summary of the methods.

Research Questions

While post-intervention outcomes of truancy diversion court programs have yielded mixed results on middle and high school students' school attendance, grades and behavior, the current literature failed to examine participants' perceptions regarding how well truancy

diversion court programs improve student attendance and performance. Educational leaders have to develop and advocate for truancy diversion court programs that bring together the resources of the school, family, and the community to positively affect student attendance, achievement, and graduation rate. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine one such truancy diversion court program, the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, and the influence it had on absenteeism, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments among truant sixth through ninth grade students, who completed the Program during the 2010-2011 school year, in a suburban Middle Georgia school district. Four questions guided this research:

1. How do participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceive the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments?

2. What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

3. What are participants' perceptions about how the Project Reconnect Workshop disseminates school district policy for excused absences?

4. What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker?

Research Design

The primary focus of the study was on the perceptions of participants; therefore, a qualitative analysis was used to explore the relationships among the data. Qualitative research methods examine the depth of understanding and the deeper meanings of human experience (Babbie & Rubin, 2005); that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, a qualitative research design allowed the researcher to acquire an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and experiences of a small

number of respondents (Horejsi & Sheafor, 2011). Qualitative research methods were based on a small number of respondents and applied when the basic characteristics of a phenomenon were unclear or poorly defined (Horejsi & Shearfor, 2011) like the dearth amount of research regarding participants' perceptions of truancy diversion court programs. There are several types of inquiry methods that aremployed in qualitative research; as a result, this study used a case study design to investigate the perception of participants.

A case study is an in-depth investigation, description, and analysis of a bounded system in which various methods are used for data collection or data analysis (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, a bounded system means that the research case is separated in terms of time, place, or some physical boundary (Crewswell, 2008). The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of the study (e.g., the case) to a bounded system in which there are boundaries (Merriam, 2009). This study was bounded in terms of time, given that the participants openly enrolled in the Project Reconnect Program from September to April of the 2010-2011 school year. This study was also bounded in terms of the place, given that the participants in the Project Reconnect Program were enrolled in one of the eight middle schools or one of the six high schools in the Middle Georgia school district. As a result, case study research offers a lens to examine instances of a phenomenon in real-life settings and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (Borg, Gail, & Gail, 2007). This type of methodology allowed for investigation of a particular program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy (Merriam, 2009). In response, a single perspective of the participants was explored from multiple components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program (school attendance, compliance with school rules, the completion of class assignments, etc.). According, to Borg et al. (2007) a case study design should be used to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon. By comparison, Yin (2003) asserted that "how" and "why"

research questions are more explanatory questions that lead to the use of case study research, considering that the questions deal with operational links that need to be traced over time, rather than frequencies or incidence. Therefore, case study research was the preferred method for examining contemporary events when the research could not manipulate relevant behaviors or events (Yin, 2003). In this research, the contemporary event was the participants' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program; as a result, case study research was preferred given the vast array of contextual variables that contribute to students' truancy.

A case study involves a variety of evidence regarding that case, perhaps including interviews, observations, existing documents, or evidence acquired by quantitative research methods (Babbie & Rubin, 2005). In this study, the research intended to help researchers to grasp the meaning that events, experiences, situations, and actions have for participants in the study (Borg et al., 2007). Case studies also can help researchers to understand the process by which events and actions have taken place that lead to particular outcomes (Borg et al., 2007). The case study permitted the researcher to evaluate, determine, and uncover participants' meanings of events, experiences, situations, and actions that are associated with the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. This design offered a lens to identify participants' perceptions of whether or not and how or why the program deterred them from accruing additional unexcused absences.

<div align="center">**Site Selection**</div>

This study was conducted in a suburban school district in Middle Georgia. This suburban school district has been recognized for producing high achieving students in the state of Georgia and on the national level as well. All participants in the study completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year.

Selection of Participants

It was essential to the design of the study that the participants were former truant sixth through ninth grade students who met the following criteria. First, the students had accrued eight or more unexcused absences during the 2010-2011 school year, according to a suburban Middle Georgia school district's attendance policy. Second, the students agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year. Third, the students were enrolled in the suburban Middle Georgia school district during the 2010-2011 school year. Given these criteria, populations of 68 students were identified as possible participants. Of these 68 students who completed the Project Reconnect Program during the 2010-2011 school year, 52 were still enrolled in the school district.

The participants were recruited via purposive sampling. This sampling method permitted the researcher to study a small subset of a larger population in which many members of the subset were easily identified, but enumerating all of them would have been nearly impossible (Babbie & Rubin, 2005). The intent of purposive sampling was to achieve an in-depth understanding of selected individuals and the phenomena being studied (Borg et al., 2007). Determining the actual number of participants to interview depended on the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources to support the study (Merriam, 2009). However, Borg et al. (2007) characterized a focus group as a small group that includes seven to ten people who are questioned by a skilled interviewer. Based on this model, the researcher sought to collect data from eight truant middle and high school students who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion during the 2010-2011 school year. This study was limited to eight participants, due to the researcher's desire to interview between ten to twelve percent of the sixty-eight truants who agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Program during the 2010-2011 school year. These eight participants would have completed a face-to-face

interview and focus group. Two additional truant students who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion during the 2010-2011 school were selected (but not included in the study) to pilot the semi-structured interview questions to establish face validity and efficacy. The pilot study allowed the researcher to compose questions that appeared to measure participant perceptions of the Project Reconnect Program. Finally, participation in this study gave the participants a voice in providing a critical review of the components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, which could help to reduce truancy and increase student achievement among students in sixth through ninth grade.

After gaining department support, the researcher submitted the Institutional Review Approval (IRB) application to the Georgia Southern University for approval. Upon approval from Georgia Southern University, the researcher submitted a research proposal to the study school district's director of professional learning, after obtaining approval to conduct the study from the IRB at the Georgia Southern University. Once approval was granted, a purposive sample of ten participants was selected via a generated report of all the truants' names from the school district's truancy court database from the 2010-2011 school year. After these data were acquired, the researcher selected and cross referenced the first ten names from the generated report with the school district's Infinite Campus database, which included students' names, contact information, phone numbers, and home addresses.

The study district's (2010-2011) truancy court database generated truancy reports alphabetically according to students' sir names; thus, the researcher printed the names of the first ten students who are listed in the database. These students' names were cross referenced with the district's Infinite Campus database student summary information screen which lists students' home phone numbers and addresses. Some of the names generated in this manner had the likelihood of having been referred to the program by the researcher. In order to reduce potential

bias, the researcher cross referenced the students' names with his 2010-2011 Project Reconnect Diversion Program files to ensure that the sample did not include any students that he referred to the program. After that was done, the researcher printed the students' summary information page, which included their home phone numbers and addresses from the Infinite Campus database. From that point, the researcher contacted the identified participants' parents about the study via a phone call. Parents who agreed to participate after the phone call were mailed the informed consent, parental consent, minor's assent, and debriefing forms (along with a self-addressed return envelope).

The researcher asked the participants' parents to return (within one week) the informed consent, parental consent, and minor's assent forms via a self-addressed return envelope (containing the researcher's work address) that the researcher mailed to their home address. The researcher mailed these forms and the self-addressed envelope (simultaneously) to the participants' home addresses. The researcher called (no more than three follow-up phone calls) the participant's parent if the self-addressed envelope was not received within fourteen business days. However, if a parent or identified participant did not consent to participate in the study or if the home phone number was not valid, the researcher repeated this process by obtaining the next group of (11-20, 21-30, 31-40, etc.) names listed on generated report from the study district's (2010-2011) truancy court database. This process was replicated until ten participates were obtained for the study. In order to encourage participation, the researcher gave the eight participants a $20 Walmart gift card, while the two participants who helped to pilot the semi-structured interview questions each received a $10 Walmart gift card. Additionally, the parents of the eight participants received a $30 gift gas card, while the parents of the two participants received a $20 gas gift card.

Instrumentation

The data were collected via a researcher designed semi-structured interview question guide. The instrument was developed from salient topics ascertained from the literature review on truancy and it was altered according to the researcher's experiences as a school social worker and referrer to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. A research methodologist critiqued the semi-structured interview questions. These questions were field tested to establish face validity and efficacy via two former participants from the sample who were not included in the study. A semi-structured interview permitted the interviewer to ask a series of structured questions and then probe more deeply with open-ended questions to obtain additional information (Borg et al., 2007). The semi-structured interview format permitted the researcher to respond to the situation at hand and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 2009).

The semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the data to answer four guiding research questions. To achieve this goal, nine open-ended questions and one close-ended question were designed for the semi-structured interview; these questions were connected to the four broader research questions. For example, the purpose of the first research question was to determine the participants' thoughts about the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of assignments. As a result, the first research question was directly related to questions three, four, seven, and nine on the semi-structured interview guide. These questions were designed to offer insight about participants' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's influence or the lack thereof on the student's behavior (e.g., attendance, grades, and adherence to rules), and knowledge of the district's absence policy.

The second research question was designed to assess if the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had influenced the participants' preparation, routine, or attitude regarding their school

attendance. This question also permitted participants to discuss their dislike or regard for the program. Research question two corresponds with questions one, two, and five on the semi-structured interview guide. The aim of these questions was to discover elements that participants liked about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program as well as components that were helpful, problematic or need to be refined. In response, this question offered data about the students' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's effectiveness and or the lack thereof.

Research question three was designed to assess if the Project Reconnect Workshop enlightened participants about the school district's policy for excused absences. This question was intended to assess participants' thoughts as to whether or not the Project Reconnect Diversion Program Workshop deterred them from accruing additional unexcused absences or had an effect on their overall school attendance. As a result, question six on the semi-structured interview guide permitted the participants to reflect about their pre-Project Reconnect and post-Project Reconnect school attendance status and the variables or conditions that might have influenced their school attendance (e.g., peer group, relation with adults in the school building, etc.) prior to and after completing the program. Finally, the forth research question was designed to assess participants' perceptions regarding if the weekly check-in meetings with the truants' assigned social worker empowered them to attend school. This research question was reflected on question eight on the semi-structured interview guide.

Pilot-Testing the Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Although interviews offer valuable data, they are susceptible to bias (Borg et al., 2007). For this reason, the interview guide and procedures were reviewed by a third party and piloted in order to ensure that these instruments would yield reasonably unbiased data (Borg et al., 2007).The researcher solicited a research methodologist to critique the interview guide. From that juncture, the interview guide was field tested to check the wording of the interview questions

as well as establishing face validity and efficacy. This was accomplished by interviewing two truant students from the sample who were not included in the study. During the field test, the researcher was alerted to communication problems, evidence of inadequate motivation on the part of the respondents, and other clues that suggested the need for rephrasing questions or revising the procedure (Borg et al., 2007). The necessary modifications were made to the interview guide and procedures, which was done in consultation with the research methodologist. The revised interview guide and procedures were used in the face-to-face interviews and the small group meeting with participants in the main study.

The Interview

Interviewing was the best technique to collect data in this study, considering that it allowed the researcher to acquire information about the participants' feelings as well recollection of past events that cannot be replicated (Merriam, 2009). The face-to-face format of interviewing permitted the researcher to probe the participants for more information about vague responses to open-ended questions, as well as developing a deeper and more subjective understanding of the participants' experiences of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Moreover, the small group interviews permitted the researcher to question the participants systematically and simultaneously (Babbie & Rubin, 2005). According to Kadushin (1972), joint interviewing or small group involves one researcher who talks with two people for the purpose of collecting information about how the pair perceived the same event. The face-to-face interviews and small groups included semi-structured questions, which consisted of a list in outline form from the topics and issues that the interviewer could ask about, but which allowed the interviewer to be flexible, and to adapt the style of the interview and the sequence and wording of the questions (Babbie & Rabbie, 2005). In order to reduce ambiguity among participants' responses during the small group, the researcher randomly assigned a pseudo number ranging from one through eight

to each participate and instructed participants to state their number prior to replying to the semi-structured questions. The researcher developed and maintained a list with the participants' pseudo numbers. The semi-structured questions were transcribed into outline form according to the four broader research questions. These questions were connected to multiple components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program (school attendance, compliance with school rules, the completion of class, etc.).

The fact-to-face interviews and two small group meetings took place in the study school district's student services building. The two small group meetings included two participants. Each of the fact-to-face interviews took approximately1 hour to complete. The researcher read a confidentiality statement and instructions to the participants during the face-to-face interviews and two small group meetings. Additionally, considering that there were ten questions on the interview guide, the researcher anticipated that the participants would answer each question within 5 minutes. The researcher also anticipated that it would take approximately 5 minutes to establish a rapport with the participants, while 2 minutes would be necessary to read the directions and approximately 5 minutes for questions and answers. By contrast, the two small group meetings were limited to 2 hours, given that there were ten questions on the interview guide. The researcher thought that 5 minutes would be required to develop a rapport with the group, along with 2 minutes to read the directions, and 6 minutes for questions and answers. It was anticipated that the small group would answer each question within 10 minutes. Finally, the researcher addressed all questions or comments during, prior to, or after each interview and the small group.

Data Collection

With qualitative research, data collection consists of asking, watching, and reviewing people's activities, behaviors, and actions (Merriam, 2009). These data are most commonly

collected through interviews in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). There are various forms of data that can be categorized to collect qualitative data (Crewswell, 2008); however, this study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Specifically, face-to-face interviews and two small groups were the data collection methods that were employed to answer the research questions and acquire insight about truancy. Crewswell (2008) recommends that audiotape should be used during the interview, along with brief notes in the event that the recorder should malfunction. Another advantage of using audio recorders is that it can be replayed for careful study (Borg et al., 2007). The researcher transcribed the audiotapes for each interview and for the small group.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2008) described data analysis as the process of "taking the data apart" to determine individual responses and then "putting it together" to summarize and draw conclusions about a phenomenon. This process is as much art as science, considering that there are no cut-and-dried steps that guarantee success (Babbie & Rubin, 2005). Considering that the design of each case study is determined by the researcher conducting the study and is specific to the phenomenon being studies (Borg et al., 2007). However, the first step in analyzing qualitative research consists of collecting the data and then preparing them for data analysis, which is followed by coding the data and constructing categories about the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008).

According to Merriam (2009), the data analysis process for case study research should begin when all the information about the case is brought together, including the interview transcript and field notes. At this juncture, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes. Then, the content of the interview and small group transcripts were analyzed and openly coded, as bits of potentially relevant data were found for answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009).

Assigning codes to the pieces of data is the way to begin constructing categories by grouping the

comments that seem to go together (Merriam, 2009). Developing categories that adequately

encompass and summarize the data is a critical step of qualitative data analysis (Borg et al.,

2007), considering that the challenge is to construct categories that capture recurring patterns that

cut across the data (Merriam, 2009). Although the number of categories a researcher constructs

depends on the data and focus of the researcher (Merriam, 2009), Creswell (2008) suggested

creating five to seven categories by examining the codes that participants discuss most

frequently, are unique or surprising, have the most evidence to support them, or are those the

researcher might except to find when studying the phenomenon. Towards that end, categories

should identify significant phenomena that share sufficient similarities that they can be

considered instances of the same construct (Borg et al., 2007). Considering this information, the

researcher linked each category with the respective research question that the data were

responsive to supporting or answering.

Reporting the Data

A narrative discussion is the primary form for reporting and representing findings in

qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). Thus, there were a number of ways to organize a case

study report (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009) such that enough detail was provided in which the

reader has a sense of having made the observation with the researcher (Babbie & Rubin, 2005).

As a result, this study used the analytical reporting style to report the aspects of the cases that

had the greatest bearing on the research questions, including literature and past research studies

on truancy, and a discussion about how participants have or have not been empowered or

changed. Borg et al. (2007) described analytical reporting in a qualitative research report as the

use of an objective writing style in which the researcher's voice is silent or subdued and other

conventional topics typical of quantitative research reporting are covered: introduction, literature

review, methodology, results, and discussion. In response, the researcher reported the qualitative data by the research questions, which were matched, with corresponding questions from the semi-structured interview guide. These data were presented using tables. Finally, the findings of this study were reported as aggregated data, including the school name, which was only referenced as a middle school or high school. Moreover, to maintain the participants' confidentiality, each subject was randomly assigned a number of one through eight by the researcher. In this study, the eight participants were referenced according to their pseudo number.

Researcher Bias

There was potential for researcher bias for several reasons, given that the researcher referred students to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year and continues to do so. Moreover, the researcher was employed in the study school district. In order to address this issue, the researcher did not recruit participants for this study who he had referred to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Additionally, the peer examination and peer review strategy were employed to control potential researcher bias. According to Merriam (2009), the examination or review could be conducted by a colleague who is familiar with the research topic, whereby a discussion regarding the process of the study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations is done.

Ethical Considerations

In an effort to reinforce the ethical treatment of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program participants, certain prescribed steps were taken during the research process of this study. More specifically, each Project Reconnect Diversion Program participant was provided with minor assent, informed consent, and parental informed consent forms verifying his or her voluntary participation in the study and indicating his or her understanding that they could termination their

participation at any point if they chose to do so. The informed consent form outlined each aspect of the participants' participation as well as their option to withdraw from the study at any phase in the process. Interview data were kept confidential at all times, including the interview tapes, transcripts of the tapes, and interview notes. These data along with the Infinite Campus student information sheets and the students' names ascertained from the school district's truancy court database will be secured in a lock file cabinet in the researcher's office for a minimum of three years. Finally, the transcripts were coded with pseudo numbers.

Limitations

The population in this study was limited to eight participants who were enrolled in a suburban Middle Georgia school district and agreed to participate in and complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year. As a result, the transferability of findings to other truant students who participated in truancy diversion court programs is limited. To that end, an assumption was made that all participants in the study would answer the questions in a truthful manner and that the information that they provided would reflect their beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions. This study was delimited to reviewing five components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program: encouraging school attendance, compliance with school rules, completion of class assignments, the weekly check-in meetings with participants' assigned social worker, and the dissemination of school district policy for excused absences during the Project Reconnect Workshop. Finally, the face-to-face interviews and small group was delimited to one meeting per participant and one follow-up meeting, in which data were gathered from eight middle and high school students who participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was a limitation given that data were collected from a suburban Middle Georgia school district. Participants' responses in the small group were

a limitation that might be influenced by verbal or non-verbal communication of members in the group. Another limitation was that the researcher refers middle and high school truants to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Finally, the researcher was employed in the study district where the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was implemented during the 2010-2011 school year; thus, the researcher had a background with the participants as a school social worker.

Summary

This study employed four research questions to examine perceptions related to the impact of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's influence on absenteeism, compliance with school rules, completion of classroom assignments, knowledge of the school district's excused absence policy, and weekly check-in meetings with assigned social worker, among truant sixth through ninth grade students in a suburban Middle Georgia school district. A qualitative research design was employed to answer the research questions, considering that this study was designed to acquire an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and experiences of eight former participants who participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year. To achieve this goal, the researcher used a case study design to investigate components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

The population in this study was delimited to eight participants. The participant pool was selected via purposive sampling and then participants within that pool were self-select through agreeing to participate in the study. These participants participated in a face-to-face interview and small groups; for example, two former participants who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year were selected (but not included in the study) to field test the semi-structured interview questions to establish face validity and efficacy. That process was conducted after the researcher had obtained Institutional Review Approval from the Georgia Southern University, along with approval from the study school district's

director of professional learning. Then, the researcher acquired the students' names and contact information from the school district's truancy database and Infinite Campus database. From there, the researcher contacted the students' parents about the study via a phone call along with mailing informed consent, parental informed consent, minor's assent and debriefing forms to their home address.

This study used face-to-face interviews and two small groups to collect the data. A researcher designed semi-structured interview question guide that was developed from the salient literature on truancy and according to the researcher's experiences as a school social worker and refer to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program were used to collect the data. The semi-structured interview guide was critiqued by a research methodologist and then field-tested with two truants to establish face validity and efficacy.

The researcher used audiotapes during each interview and focus group. The researcher transcribed these audiotapes. Then, the researcher analyzed and coded the transcripts for patterns assigning codes to the pieces of data and constructed categories by grouping comments that supported or answered the four research questions. The categories reflected participants' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's goals to encourage truant and middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. These findings were reported in the analytical report style, which included the aspects of the cases that had the greatest bearing on the research questions. The incorporation of literature and past research studies, and a discussion about how the participates have or have not been empowered or changed were discussed as well.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

While post-intervention outcomes of truancy diversion court programs have yielded mixed results on middle and high school students' school attendance, the existing literature fails to examine middle and high school participants' perceptions regarding how well truancy diversion court programs improve school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. The purpose of this study was to examine one such truancy diversion program, the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, and the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact that this program has on school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. A qualitative case study design was employed to explore participants' perceptions of the program's goals including improving school attendance, improved compliance with rules, and improved completions of classroom assignments.

Research Questions

This study focused on four research questions:

1. How do participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceive the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments?

2. What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

3. What are participants' perceptions about how the Project Reconnect Workshop disseminates school district policy for excused absences?

4. What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker?

Research Design

Considering the exploratory nature of the research questions, this study used a qualitative design to gather data on the participants' experiences with the Program Reconnect Diversion Program. The researcher interviewed participants individually and as part of a small group. Before the main study was conducted, the interview questions were piloted with two participants from the sample, who were not included in the main study, to establish validity. Individuals enrolled in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year were asked to participate in the study. The participants were all currently enrolled in a suburban school district, which is located in middle Georgia. Ten individuals were asked to participate in the study, and of these six agreed to participate. From these six participants, two were included in the pilot study, and the remaining four provided the primary data set on which the analysis was conducted. Each participant was assigned a number to protect his or her identity and maintain confidentiality.

Recruitment

A total of 68 truant middle and high school students completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year, and 39 of those students were still enrolled in the study school district at the onset of the study. The researcher did not attempt to contact the 29 students who were no longer in enrolled in the study school district, considering that seventeen of the students had enrolled in other school schools, three students had been hospitalized, five students were incarcerated in the Youth Detention Center, and the names of four students were no longer visible in the study district's student information database. In spite of these challenges, the researcher sought to interview between ten to eight of the 68 truants who

completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year and were still actively enrolled in the study school district. By selecting ten to eight of the 68 truants, the small group interviews would have included a total of six to eight participants. Borg et al. (2007) characterized a focus group as a small group that includes seven to ten people who are questioned by a skilled interviewer. Thus, the researcher sought to collect data from eight truant middle and high school students who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year. As a result, this study was limited to eight participants. However, obtaining consent from the possible participants was difficult. A standard calling regiment was planned (3 phone calls, 2 call backs). However, this recruitment procedure could only be completed with 23 students. This was largely because 16 of the 39 individuals listed a phone number that was no longer a working phone number. The phone numbers were taken from the information that the parents had provided to the school for the study school district's student contact information database. Additionally, of the phone numbers that were working, 11 individuals either did not answer or returned the call as requested when a message was left. Of the 11 parents who were contacted, 10 agreed for their child to participate in the main study; on the day of the interviews, 4 students attended.

Demographic Profile of the Participants

The data in Table 1 includes the demographic profile of the four participants who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program and were currently enrolled in the middle Georgia study school district. Participant 1 was a 14-year-old Caucasian male, who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program as a sixth grader during the 2010-2011 school year. Participant 2 was a 17-year-old Caucasian female, who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program as a tenth grader during the 2010-2011 school year. Participant 3 was a 15-year-old Latino male, who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program as a seventh

grader during the 2010-2011 school year. Participant 4 was a 16-year-old African American

female, who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program as a seventh grader during the

2010-2011 school year. All of the participants were currently enrolled in the study school district

in April of 2013.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Project Reconnect Participants

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Grade
Participant 1	14	White	Male	6
Participant 2	17	White	Female	10
Participant 3	15	Latino	Male	7
Participant 4	16	Black	Female	7

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted with two participants who were not included in the main

study but completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school

year. The participants were a 15-year-old African American female and a 13-year-old Latino

male. Both participants were actively enrolled in a suburban Middle Georgia school district at

the time of the pilot project. The pilot study was conducted to ensure that the semi-structured

interview guide and procedures would yield reasonably unbiased data. The pilot of the interview

guide was conducted after school, in the study school district's student services cafeteria, and

lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. The participants sat side by side at a rectangular

table with the researcher sitting directly across from them on the opposite side of the table. This

less formal sitting arrangement provided a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants were

fully engaged, as they appeared eager to participate in the pilot study. For example, the

participants maintained eye contact and positive nonverbal communication including smiling,

nodding, and gesturing in such a way as to ensure their responses were understood. In order to establish a rapport with the participants, the researcher initially asked about how their day at school had gone, what they liked best about the school day, and about their postsecondary plans.

The pilot study was recorded with a cassette tape recorder and then transcribed by the researcher. During the pilot study, the researcher read the directions and ten questions from the interview guide to the participants. While reading the directions, the researcher noticed that one of the participants looked a bit puzzled. After the directions were read, the researcher asked the participants if any part of the directions needed to be clarified. In response, one of the participants said that the last part of the directions was read too fast. As a result, the researcher made note to pay particular attention to the rate at which the instructions were read when interviewing the participants. To address the issue with the directions, the researcher read the directions again at a slower rate and spoke distinctly.

The participants formulated statements in a clear manner that responded directly to respective questions on the ten item semi-structured interview guide. However, in response to question six on the interview guide, participant three said that he did not recall having attended the Project Reconnect Workshop, which was a major requirement of the program. In response, the researcher attempted to refresh the participant's memory by describing the nature of the Project Reconnect Workshop, along with the location, and the facilitators' names. These prompts helped the participant to remember the Project Reconnect Workshop. As a result, the researcher made note that it might be necessary (if the participant does not immediately remember) to refresh participants' memories about the nature and location of the Project Reconnect Workshop, along with the facilitators' names.

After the participants' responses to question ten on the interview guide, the researcher asked the participants if any other information should be included in the interview questionnaire,

and they said that the questionnaire was direct and to the point. Since some of the participants'
responses lacked depth to the questions on the semi-structured interview guide, the researcher
decided to ask the following impromptu question during the pilot study in hopes that it would
yield more robust data, "If you were to create your own Project Reconnect Program on today,
how would it look? Would it look similar to the Program that you completed or would you
modify some of the components?" This question did not produce any significant or robust data,
considering that the two participants' both reported that their program would be similar to the
current Project Reconnect Program, with the exception of reduced community service hours. The
participants answered most of the questions from the semi-structured interview guide within
approximately three minutes per question, with question one having required slightly more time
for reflection. Moreover, the responses that were generated by question one from the interview
guide appeared to facilitate a non-intimidating dialogue, in which the participants felt at ease
discussing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. However, in reference to question one on
the interview protocol, one of the participants did ask what was meant by the word
"weaknesses." In response, the researcher told the participant that weaknesses meant flaws.
Besides these issues, the questions on the semi-structured interview guide appeared to be easily
understood, according to the participants' responses to the pilot study.

Data Collection and Coding

The face-to-face individual interviews and small group meetings were conducted over a
period of approximately two weeks. The interviews were recorded using a cassette tape recorder
and were transcribed by the researcher within 24 hours of the interview. Considering the small
number of transcripts, the coding was performed manually (MacMillan, 2012). As a result, the
researcher read both the interview and small group transcripts three times to identify common
themes, conceptual approaches, and other data nuances that provided answers to the research

questions. While reading the transcripts and field notes, comments were notated in the margins as interesting, potentially relevant, or potentially useful to the study. Then, the interview and small group transcripts were analyzed and coded (Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell (2008), the first step in analyzing qualitative research is to collect the data and then prepare it for analysis, which is followed by coding the data and then constructing categories about the central phenomenon. To achieve this goal, each transcript was considered a data set to itself and open coding was employed to obtain answers to each of the research questions. The open coding permitted the researcher to explore, compare, and contrast recurring patterns from one transcript to the next, as potentially relevant bits of information emerged for answering the research questions. These data were grouped into categories based on the responsive evidence that answered the respective research question. After the data were grouped into categories, the researcher conducted a data synthesis, which is presented in the following sections of this chapter.

Critical Reader

After all individual interviews and small groups were coded, the data sets and the surface content were provided to a critical reader. The critical reader was solicited to assist the researcher with the first analysis of the transcripts from the individual and small group interviews. As a result, the critical reader provided the researcher with a total of 17 statements that emerged from the individual and small group interviews. The researcher's lists of open codes from the individual and small group transcripts were compared to the surface content that the critical reader had identified. For example, the researcher found eleven statements that supported research question one, and nine statements emerged that supported research question two. Moreover, two statements supported research question three, while two did not. In total, the researcher found three statements that supported research question four. These findings were

compared with the critical reader's 17 patterns; however, the critical reader did not deductively code for meaning. Instead the critical reader counted the number of times participants' gave similar statements; as a result, the critical reader's analysis was not useful.

Analysis of Research Question 1

1. How do participants in the Project Reconnect Program Diversion perceive the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments?

The purpose of asking the first research questions was to determine the participants' thoughts about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of assignments. In order to answer this research question participants were asked questions from the interview guide, which can be found in Appendix A. The following common themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) improved school attendance, (b) limited impact on school rules, (c) better grades, and (d) logistics with the Project Reconnect Folder. Each theme is presented below with evidence from the participants. During the individual interviews and small groups, the participants described the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's effectiveness to encouraging school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments.

Improved School Attendance

The participants reported that their school attendance had improved as a result of completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. These participants also discussed the valid reasons why they would be absent from school since participating in the program. During the small group, participants reported statements such as:

> Participant 1: I attend school a lot more than I did. I have not missed anymore days of school. Sometimes I wake up late but other than that it has helped me to attend school.

Participant 3: Like now, I attend school on a regular basis [now].

Participant 4: Well, I skipped pretty often sometimes. Since I come to school now the only time that I am absent is due to a medical reason.

During the individual interviews, participants reported statements such as:

Participant 3: By doing the Program, I got the assignments and I did the work when I started coming to school a lot more

Participant 4: Well, I started attending school - you know going to school more often and staying in. I use to stay out of class on purpose, you know I would skip class or whatever in the morning.

The participants also discussed the legitimate reasons why they are absent from school.

Participant 3: Like I only stay home when I am sick because I do not want to make the other students sick.

Participant 4: Since I come to school now the only time that I am absent is due to a medical reason.

The thought of having to redo the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was also reported as a

motivating factor for attending school each day.

Participant 2: I do not want to go through it again so it makes me come to school.

Limited Impact on School Rules

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was perceived to have impacted two

participants' compliance with school rules:

Participant 1: In fact, the Reconnect Program has helped me to do a lot better and obey the school rules. I really did not care about a lot of things, but that Project Reconnect experience helped me. So, I just did my best to follow the rules.

Participant 4: I use to stay out of class on purpose, you know I would skip class or whatever in the morning.

Prior to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, Participant 1 was not aware of the

consequences that truancy could lead to. As a result, Participant 1 reported that his school

attendance improved because he did not want to get into more trouble. Participant 1 stated it this

way:

> Yes! One of the main reasons why I got the truancy thing was because I skipped school pretty often, like every other week. I did not know that I could get in trouble for that [truancy] so it caught up with me. So you know, I started going to school a lot more.

Participants 2 and 3 did not perceive that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had impacted

their compliance with schools rules. These participants reported that they complied with the rules

prior to agreeing to complete the program. Two of their statements are highlighted here:

> Participant 2: I have always obeyed the rules and gotten good grades, because my mother and teachers expected me to do so.

> Participant 3: By doing the Program, I got the assignments and I did the work. Well, when I started coming to school a lot more, I got more assignments and homework. I really did not do much homework other than getting my grade up, and I have always obeyed the school rules.

Better Grades

Three of the four participants reported better grades as their daily school attendance

improved. Their work ethic and outlook on school changed when they participated in the Project

Reconnect Program. During the small groups and individual interviews, participants made

comments such as:

> Participant 1: By staying out of class and missing all kinds of assignments and stuff, I was failing. When I did the Reconnect Program, I stayed in class and did all my work and brought my grades up.

> Participant 2: I noticed that after Reconnect, I was able to achieve higher grades, maybe because I went to school more often. My mother, relatives, and teachers would be disappointed with me if my graders were not up to fit."

> Participant 4: I started doing my class work when I was assigned to the Program. I am still doing work in school, and I am not skipping class anymore.

 A newly found sense of motivation empowered the participants to complete assignments and to

actively participate in class. For example, Participant 4 credited the Project Reconnect Program

with helping her to achieve better grades. She attributed her work ethic with the Project

Diversion Reconnect Program:

> Participant 4: I use to not care about school – like I failed classes and test. During the
> Project Reconnect Program, like it was bad to fall asleep during class, so I
> stopped and started doing all of my work. I brought my grades up.

In addition to improved school attendance, teacher support was mentioned as another factor that

helped Participant 1 to obtain better grades. He equated the teacher's support with helping to

improve his grades:

> Participant 1: I think Project Reconnect is good for kids who might need some extra help.
> Like my grades went up. It was like the teachers were there to support and help
> me. That is what I liked about it. Reconnect does that well.

Participant 4 discussed how the Project Reconnect Diversion Program encouraged him to

complete assignments and attend school (after having completed the program):

> Participant 4: I started doing my class work when I was assigned to the Program. I am
> still doing work in school, and I am not skipping class anymore.

Participants' perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's influence on

grades are depicted in Table 2, which includes supporting data from the individual interviews

and small group meetings. The data depicted in Table 2 illustrates that three of the four

participants favorably indicated that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had a positive

influence on their grades. Brief highlight of the participants' statements are included under the

comments section in Table 2, along with an "X" under the favorable heading which identifies

each participant's response supported the idea that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had

an influence on grades and students'. The major findings in Table 2 were acquired from

participants' comments to the questions on interview protocol guide.

Table 2

Participants' Perceptions of Project Reconnect's Influence on Grades and Relationships with Adults

Participant	Major Findings	Favorable	Comments
	Grades		
Participant 1		X	My grades improved
Participant 2		X	Achieved higher grades
Participant 4		X	I brought my grades up

Impression of the Reconnect Folder

The participants identified cons and pros related to the Project Reconnect folder, considering that some teachers did not want to sign it or the issue that it could get lost. By contrast, one participant reported the benefits of the Project Reconnect folder. An analysis of the participants' reflections on the Project Reconnect folder led to the development of the logistics with the reconnect folder theme. The participants' remarks provided commentary for this theme.

Logistics with the Reconnect Folder

Participants expressed that the Project Reconnect folder was problematic as it was easily lost or they did not like asking the teacher to sign it each day. Here are two examples of the frustration that participants encountered with the Project Reconnect Folder.

Participant 1: However, there was not much that I disliked about it except carrying around the folder, because I would lose mine along with everything in it.

Participant 2: I disliked that the teacher had to sign a folder every day.

The tracking sheet that is affixed to the Project Reconnect folder was credited for helping to improving participant three's school attendance and participation in class:

Participant 3: Actually, I liked that you had to have the tracking sheet signed, because I actually had to show-up for class, and I had to participate in the work.

The data analysis for research question 1 illustrates that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was perceived to have improved school attendance and increased grades, while the program's influence on compliance with school rules was limited. Since completing the program, the participants reported a relationship between increased school attendance and improved grades. In addition, the participants also expressed positive and negative points-of-view regarding the Project Reconnect Folder.

Analysis of Research Question 2

2. What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

The second research question was designed to examine if the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had influenced the participants' preparation, routine, or attitude regarding their school attendance. In response, the four participants described to the researcher how changes in their behavior helped them to attend school. An analysis of the participants' remarks provided commentary for the following common themes that emerged during the data analysis: (a) behavioral change, (b) positive attitude, and (c) new outlook on school attendance.

Behavioral Change

Three of the four participants cited examples of the behavioral changes that they developed and how it impacted their school attendance. These participants reflected on how their decisions had positively impacted their improved school attendance. During the individual and small group interviews, participants made comments regarding their new routines:

Participant 3: I would go to bed late watching TV and I would wake up on my own. So now, I go to bed at a reasonable time.

Participant 4: Like I use to shower in the morning, now I take showers at night and I get my stuff ready at night so that I am prepared to walk out the front door for the school bus.

Participant 2 discussed the process of how she determines if she is going to attend school, along with the motivating factor that influences her daily school attendance:

> Participant 2: I started looking at the severity of how sick I was, then I figured that I could attend school if I was not overly sick. A lot times, even now, I don't want to go to but I get up and go because I do not want to go through the Reconnect Program again.

Positive Attitude

Across the interview transcripts three of the four participants' statements reflected a positive attitude regarding how the Project Reconnect Program had impacted their school attendance, motivational level, and grades. During the individual interviews and small group meetings, the participants' comments included statements like:

> Participant 1: I was not doing well in school so I started to realize that I could do a lot better. When I started attending school, my grades improved. Then, I realized that I could do better so I started doing my work in class. It affected the way that I see things, like I see things differently, whereas I use to think of school as a joke.

> Participant 2: It [Project Reconnect] did push me to do better in school and get caught up more frequently, instead of just giving up.

> Participant 4: It [The Project Reconnect Diversion Program] helped me do better on a whole with my schoolwork and attitude.

The long-term positive effect of Project Reconnect Diversion Program's on students' attitudes, school attendance, and grades was felt after the program had been completed. For example, Participant 1 credited the program with helping to change his attitude, as well as helping him to attend school and obey the school rules. Participants 1 stated it this way:

> Participant 1: I attend school a lot more than I did. I have not missed any more days of school. Sometimes I wake up late but other than that it has helped me to attend school. In fact, the Reconnect Program has helped me to do a lot better and obey the school rules. I really did not care about a lot of things, but that Project Reconnect experience helped me. I cannot really put it into words, but it helped me. For example, by doing the Program you chose not to do the work but it makes you work.

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was found to have a long-term influence on grades and improved school attendance. The participants' comments included statements like:

>	Participant 4: I started doing my class work when I was assigned to the Program. I am still doing work in school, and I am not skipping class anymore.

>	Participant 3: The Reconnect Program helped me with tardies and the excused and unexcused thing because of the Workshop, and it was an overall good thing. The Project Reconnect Program has helped to contribute to my studying, academics, and self-betterment as a ninth grader.

New Outlook on School Attendance

As a result of participating in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, the participants developed a new outlook on school attendance. These participants discussed some of the reasons why they were truant. The participants explained it this way during the small group and individual interviews:

>	Participant 1: Well, I started attending school – you know going to school more often and staying in. I use to stay out of class on purpose; you know I would skip class or whatever in the morning.

>	Participant 4: Well, I skipped pretty often sometimes. Since I come to school now the only time that I am absent is due to a medical reason.

>	Participant 1: Yes! One of the main reasons why I got the truancy thing was because I skipped school pretty often, like every other week. I did not know that I could get in trouble for that so it caught up with me. So you know, I started going to school a lot more.

Three of the four participants discussed the external factors and internal reflective thoughts that have influenced their attitude towards school attendance. Here are three examples of the external factors that the participants cited:

>	Participant 4: Mama said that if I had to do this Program again due to skipping school, that I would be in a lot of trouble. So, like I started to think about what she was saying.

>	Participant 2: I did not want to go through the Program again so I was not going to miss anymore school.

Participant 3: Yes, I did not miss anymore school because of the Workshop
      due to knowing what consequences were next.

Internally the participants self-assessed the potential consequences of not attending school, and

the consequences of not attending school appeared to empower the participants to attend school.

With this new found since of self-awareness, Participant 2 discussed the internal reflection that

she does to determine if she should not attend school. This is how she stated it:

Participant 2: Since the Project Reconnect Program, I started looking at the severity of
      how sick I was, then I figured that I could attend school if I was not overly sick. A
      lot times, even now, I don't want to go to but I get up and go because I do not
      want to go through the Reconnect Program again.

The findings for research question 2 illustrate that the Project Reconnect Diversion

Program was perceived to have influenced the participants' behavioral change, positive attitude,

and new outlook on school attendance. These participants reportedly implemented new routines

that helped to improve their school attendance, and the program was found to have increased the

participants' motivational level and outlook on school. Overall, the participants reflected on how

external factors had influenced their attitude and new perspective on school attendance.

Analysis of Research Question 3

3. What are participants' perceptions about how the Project Reconnect Workshop
   disseminates school district policy for excused absences?

The four participants interviewed for this study reflected on how the Project Reconnect

Workshop did or did not help them to better understand the school district's policy for excused

absence vs. unexcused absence, time period for submitting a legitimate excuse letter, and the

guideline for an excused absence. The participants' responses to research question three can be

categorized into three areas: (a) consistently reported having attended the Project Reconnect

Workshop, (b) inconsistently reported attending the Project Reconnect Workshop, and (c) did not

attend the Project Reconnect Workshop. The participants' reflections in these categories are presented here.

Consistently reported having attended the Project Reconnect Workshop. Participant 2 did not find the Project Reconnect Workshop to be helpful, considering her prior knowledge of the study school district's attendance policy. Participant 2 explained it this way during the small group and individual interviews:

> Participant 2: No not at all. We knew all that information before the Workshop.

> Participant 2: No because I already knew about that. What an excused and unexcused absence is and the timeframe for turning in an excuse.

The information that was shared during the Project Reconnect Workshop did help to prevent Participant 2 from obtaining more unexcused absences.

> Participant 2: Honestly, the Workshop did help me, because if I had missed anymore days, I would have gotten into a lot of trouble not only with family but with some of my teachers who expected better from me.

Inconsistently reported attending the Project Reconnect Workshop. During the individual interview and small group meeting, Participants 1 and 3 were both inconsistent with their reporting of having attended the Project Reconnect Workshop. Their statements during the small group meetings are highlighted below:

> Participant 1: Yes, I think so – liked it [the Project Reconnect Workshop] helped me to know that a parent note or doctor's excuse is necessary when I am absent. The Workshop – like it helped me to understand what an absence is.

> Participant 3: "Yes sir, I believe so!….I think that it has to do with like a note. Like you have to submit a parent note within three days when you return to school for an excused absence. Teachers will allow you to make up assignments for excused absences. Yea that is it!"

By contrast, Participants 1 and 3 contradict statements during the individual meetings:

> Participant 1: I am not sure if I attended the Reconnect Workshop. I do not remember.

> Participant 3: I did not attend the Workshop.

Did not attend the Project Reconnect Workshop. Participant 4 acknowledge that she did not attend the Project Reconnect Workshop, and she reported that she was aware of the study school district's attendance policy. She stated it this way, during the small group:

Participant 4: Already knew the difference between an excused and unexcused absence, and I did not go to the Workshop.

As a result of Participants' 1 and 3 inconsistent reports, and Participant's 4 non-participation in the Project Reconnect Workshop, a categorical theme did not emerge for research question 3.

An analysis of the data for research question 3 found that one of the four participants consistently reported attendance at the Project Reconnect Workshop, while two participants inconsistently reported having attended the workshop, and another participant maintained that she did not attend the workshop. The participant, who consistently reported having attended the workshop, reported that the workshop was not beneficial considering her prior knowledge of the school district's policy for excused absences. However, the two participants, who inconsistently reported having attended the workshop, suggested that the Project Reconnect Workshop had informed them about the school district's policy for excused absences.

Analysis of Research Question 4

4. What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker?

The participants described to the researcher how the weekly check-in meetings with the social work had positively impacted them, as they completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Instead of meeting with a school work each week, Participant 1met with a teacher. As a result, the following common themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) accountability and (b) support. Each theme is presented below with evidence for the participants. They described how the weekly check-in meetings empowered them to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

Accountability

The participants expressed that it was helpful to know that the social worker or teacher was going to check-in with them each week. These meetings made the participants more accountable to successfully complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, as the participants knew that each week the social work or teacher was going to review their Project Reconnect folder. This is how the participants reflected on their weekly check-in meetings:

> Participant 1: I never had a school social worker to check-in with me; however, I had a teacher who was a club advisor. They put me in her homeroom and she would check-in with me to ensure that I was completing the Program.

> Participant 3: Like if I did not have to check-in or whatever, I probably would have left everything at home like the Reconnect folder.

> Participant 4: It helped me to attend school and do my class work, because I knew he be there…that he was actually was going to check on me.

Support

As a result of the weekly check-in meetings, the participants also felt that the social worker and teacher supported them with completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The participants felt empowered by knowing that the social worker or teacher was going to meet with them weekly. Two of the participants' comments are highlighted here:

> Participant 4: It helped a lot. Those check-in meetings helped me - like to actually feel that I could do it. Because if I would not have had someone to check on me, then I probably would have thought about dropping out.

> Participant 3: I believe that it was actually good for me to know that someone was actually going to check on me. Instead of him saying that he would and never having shown up. But he actually did check on me.

In contrast, Participant 2 reported that the social worker did not ever meet with her. Likewise, Participant 1 did not recall having weekly check-in meetings with a social worker, instead he met with a teacher. During the individual interview and small group meeting, Participants 2 and 1 stated it this way:

Participant 2: No one ever came to check on me.

Participant 2: I did not have check-in meetings with him. He never called me to the
office. I was never checked on at all.

Participant 1: I don't think that I had one [social worker].

Participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings are depicted in Table 3, which

includes supporting data from the individual interviews and small group meetings. The data

depicted in Table 3 illustrates that two of the four participants favorably indicated that the

weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker had a positive influence on them,

while Participant 1 reported that a teacher met with him weekly. Highlights of the participants'

statements are included under the comments section in Table 3, along with an "X" under the

favorable heading that identifies that each participant's response supported the idea that the

weekly check-in meetings had a positive influence. The major findings in Table 3 were acquired

from participants' comments to the questions on the interview protocol guide.

Table 3

Participants' Perceptions of the Weekly Check-in Meetings

Participant	Major Findings Support	Favorable	Comments
Participant 1		X	I had a teacher and she would check-in to ensure that I was completing the program.
Participant 2			I did not have check-in meetings…I was not check on.
Participant 3		X	If I did not have the check-in, I probably would have left everything at home.
Participant 4		X	It helped me to attend school and do my class work. I knew that he would be there. It helped a lot. Those check-in meetings helped me – like to actually feel that I could do it. Because

> if I would not have had someone to
> check on me, then I probably would
> have thought about dropping out.

The data analysis for research question 4 illustrates that two of the four participants met weekly with a social worker, while another participant met with a teacher each week. The participants' statements suggest that the weekly check-in meetings made them more accountable with successfully completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, considering that they knew that the social worker or teacher was going to review their Project Reconnect folder to determine if they were present at school, complying with the school rules, and completing class assignments. By meeting with the social worker or teacher each week, the participants felt empowered and supported to successfully complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine participants' perceptions regarding how well the Project Reconnect Diversion Program empowered their improved school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. The findings offered insight regarding the effects to which pre-court truancy diversion intervention outcomes were sustained or the lack thereof among middle and high school participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. This qualitative focused on four participants in a Middle Georgia school district who agreed to complete the Project Reconnect Program during the 2010-2011 school year. These participants were still enrolled in the study school district when the face-to-face interviews and small group meetings were conducted with the researcher.

Data were collected over a period of approximately two weeks using a 10 question semi-structured interview guide. The researcher analyzed the data by using coding to identifying emerging themes and common conceptual approaches to describe the central phenomenon. This

analysis was used to answer the four guiding research questions. A discussion of the findings,

conclusions, and recommendations for future research will be included in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to extend the field of educational administration research on truancy diversion court programs, by examining the influence that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had on absenteeism, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments among truant sixth through ninth grade students in a suburban Middle Georgia school district. The primary goal of the research was to examine participants' perceptions regarding how well the Project Reconnect Diversion Program empowered students improved school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of school assignments. Four research questions guided the study. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceive the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments?

2. What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

3. What are participants' perceptions about how the Project Reconnect Workshop disseminates school district policy for excused absences?

4. What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker?

A qualitative research design was employed to answer these research questions. To find the answer to these questions, a purposeful sampling of four participants who completed the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program during the 2010-2011 school year was used. Data were

collected through individual face-to-face interviews and small group meetings. A brief summary of the research study is presented in this chapter along with a discussion of the research findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study. This chapter will culminate with the researcher's concluding thoughts.

Summary

The current research on truancy diversion court programs has exclusively focused on evaluating post-intervention perceptions of multifaceted interventions, which were implemented to alleviate a multitude of factors that contribute to truancy (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006). While the reported outcomes of truancy diversion court programs were largely effective (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006), the degrees of evidence supporting the success of truancy diversion court programs are debatable, given that the current literature on these programs focuses on quantitative post-intervention outcomes such as attendance, grades and behavior, and failed to examine middle and high school participants' perceptions regarding how well truancy diversion court programs improve school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. To answer these questions, researchers must use qualitative research designs that assess middle and high school truants' thoughts, values, and experiences about truancy diversion court programs. Through investigating the middle and high school truants' perspectives, a better understanding can be obtained providing insight into how schools can be proactive in developing a truancy diversion program for middle and high school students. This line of research represented an essential step in increasing student achievement and decreasing truancy among truant middle and high school students.

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was a truancy court diversion intervention that was designed to deter students who are twelve to fifteen-years old from accruing additional unexcused absences from school. The main goals of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program were to decrease truancy among middle and high school students by encouraging them to attend school, comply with school rules, and complete class assignments. This study included students who participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year. The purpose of the study was to explore program completers' perceptions of the program's goals (e.g., to encourage truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments). This study focused on four participants who completed the Project Reconnect Diversion Program during the 2010-2011 school year, and were still enrolled in the suburban study school district which is located in Middle Georgia.

The researcher developed the semi-structured interview question guide from salient topics ascertained from a literature review on truancy and it was altered according to the researcher's experiences as a school social worker and referrer to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. Two participants were used to pilot the semi-structured interview guide, while four participants were interviewed for the main study, which included individual and small group interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews with a cassette tape recorder, as well as transcribed and stored the interviews in a secured location. Each participant and his or her parent signed the informed consent, parent consent, and minor's assent forms. The participants were randomly assigned a number pseudo number of one through eight by the researcher, and the pseudo number was used when referring to the participants. The interview data were coded and analyzed for common thematic material to effectively communicate the findings of the study. A critical researcher was solicited to assist the researcher with the first analysis of the interview transcripts.

Analysis of the Research Findings

The results of this study revealed the perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's effectiveness on school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of class assignments, which yielded several commonalities regarding student achievement, program compliance, and interpersonal reflection among the four middle and high school students who participated in this study. These are the experiences that the participants perceived were uniquely influenced by the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The following additional findings emerged from this study.

Student Achievement

The findings indicated that participants' grades and daily school attendance improved as a result of completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The participants' improved school attendance and grades were attributed to several non-mutually exclusive factors. For example with improved daily school attendance, the participants reported better grades and their outlook toward school improved as they experienced academic success. The participants reported that their work ethic and motivational levels increased along with their school attendance and grades. The Project Reconnect Diversion Program's strong emphasis on daily school attendance and completion of class assignments provided a structural arraignment in which the participants were monitored and challenged to complete class assignments along with the mandatory school attendance. All of the participants discussed how their school attendance had improved, while three of the four participants described how their grades improved as a result of the program.

Program Compliance

The findings indicated that all of the participants did not experience or receive the full components of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, which include the Project Reconnect Workshop and weekly check-in meetings with the social worker. All participants who agree to

complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program are required to attend the Project Reconnect Workshop, which is used to inform participants about the school district's policy for excused absence vs. unexcused absence, time period for submitting an excused letter, and guideline for an absence. However, two of the four participants reported having attended the Project Reconnect Workshop inconsistently, while Participant 2 reportedly did not attend the workshop. The weekly check-in meetings with the social worker is another mandatory component of the program; however, Participant 2 reported that no one met with her, while Participant 1 met with a teacher each week instead of the social worker. These findings indicate that the participants did not successfully complete (due to their own action or the social worker's lack of follow-up) or comply with all of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's terms.

Interpersonal Reflection

Participants in this study discussed the variables that helped them to acquire improved school attendance or to successfully complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. These participants developed the self-awareness to evaluate the behaviors or actions that contributed to their truancy. As a result, the participants developed new daily routines or self-reflected on the consequence that would follow if they did not attend school. Moreover, the findings among the participants who had weekly check-in meetings with a social worker or teacher suggest that they felt empowered to complete the program as a result of the weekly meetings. These participants indicated that they felt more accountable to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, given that their assigned social worker or teacher was going to review the Project Reconnect Folder each week.

Discussion of the Research Findings

Research Question 1

How do participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceive the program's effectiveness to encourage school attendance, compliance with rules, and completion of class assignments?

This study examined middle and high school participants' perceptions regarding how well the Project Reconnect Diversion Program empowered them to improve their school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of classroom assignments. A total of four individuals participated in this study. Data for this study were collected using a 10 question semi-structured interview guide. Each participant was asked questions from the same interview protocol guide and they all attended an individual interview and small group meeting. The semi-structured interview questions were aligned to the literature review on truancy and according to the researcher's experience as a school social worker and referrer to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The semi-structured interview protocol guide can be found in Appendix A.

The findings for research question 1 indicated that participants in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program perceived that the program was effective in encouraging school attendance and completion of class assignments, while it was found to have a limited impact on participants' adherence to school rules. The four participants described how their daily school attendance had improved as a result of participating in Project Reconnect Diversionary Program. A review of the literature on juvenile court truancy diversion programs supports the participant's experience regarding the impact of truancy diversion programs on student attendance. For example, increases in student attendance were sustained for one semester after the participants completed 10-12 weekly sessions with the Truancy Court Team (Evans et al., 2010). The findings in this study are also parallel to the Giacomazzi et al. (2006) study, as school attendance improved

among 77% of the 114 students who participated in the Ada County Attendance Court program between one and three months after the initial hearing. Moreover, a review of the literature suggested that multidimensional community-based interventions can help to significantly reduce truancy 30-60 days after post-court intervention (Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

According to the findings for research question 1, participants' perceived that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program encouraged the completion of class assignments. During the individual interviews, three of the four participants reportedly achieved better grades as their daily school attendance improved. These participants associated their improved grades with increased school attendance. For example, Participant 4 described how she used to skip class and not care about school and would fall asleep in class, but she started doing her work and brought her grades up while participating in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. This participant's experience supports Marvul's (20102) research, which suggested that as educational expectations increase, absenteeism declines. Moreover, the long term effects of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's impact on grades was mentioned by Participant 2, as she reported that her grades increased after the program. Participant 2 attributed her better grades to her improved school attendance. Similarly, the Huddleston and Shoenfelt (2006) study found that an analysis of GPA data revealed that students in the Truancy Court Diversion (TCDP) significantly improved their grades during participation in the program and in the post-TCDP semester.

Although 27% of truant eighth graders and 41% of truant tenth graders reported grades of Ds in Henry's (2010) study, the participants in the current study did not report their actual letter grades or GPA to the researcher. Based on the findings in this study three of the four participants' grades were positively impacted by their school attendance. Prior to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, Participant 1 reported that he was failing and missed assignments

due to being truant. This finding supports the Davidson et al. (2008) study were some truants acknowledged the [academic] difficulty that they experienced upon returning back to school.

The Project Reconnect Diversion Program was not found to have a substantial effect on compliance with school rules, as only two of the four participants acknowledged that the program influenced them to obey the school rules. Those two participants reportedly complied with the school rules while completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. This finding suggests that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program influenced the participants' decisions to abide by the school rules, as well as considering how present behavior can adversely impact future outcomes. A review of the literature on school engagement parallels the participant's desire, as Evan et al. (2010) found that a statistically significant decrease in disciplinary offenses was sustained one semester after truancy court. The literature also found that the average number of disciplinary referrals decreased among truants who were exposed to social activities such as sports and field trips (Greenbaum et al., 2006). By contrast, Participant 1 said that the main reason why he got into trouble was for skipping school often, but he started attending school when he was assigned to the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

Participant 1 went on to mention that he did not want to get into more trouble, especially considering that the consequences would affect him in the future. This participant's change in behavior reflects the research of Evans et al. (2010), as a statistically significant decrease in discipline offenses were found one semester after truants participated in the Truancy Court Team intervention. However, two of the four participants in this study reported that they always complied with school rules prior to agreeing to complete the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. These participants did not perceive or report their truancy as a violation of school rules.

Research Question 2

What are the perceptions of truant students who have participated in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program regarding their intent to attend school?

Research Question 2 sought to examine if the Project Reconnect Diversion Program had influenced the participants' preparation for school, daily routine, or attitude regarding their school attendance. The following experiences were common among three of the four participants: behavioral change, positive attitude, and new outlook on school attendance. These participants reflected on how their decisions and new routines positively impacted their improved school attendance. The findings for research question 2 also indicate that the participants had a positive attitude regarding the Project Reconnect Program's impact on their grades, motivational level, and school attendance. For example, Participant 2 said that the program pushed her to do better in school and get caught up more frequently, instead of just giving up. In comparison, Participant 4 said that the program helped her to do better on a whole with her schoolwork and attitude. These statements help to further explain the findings in the Davidson et al. (2008) study where secondary teachers believed that the effects of truancy was pathological, considering that it is increasingly difficult for truants to return to school and catch up on the work they missed. The statements that Participants 2 and 4 made suggest that they had given up hope considering that they were not doing well in school due to truancy. However, while completing the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, Participants 2 and 4 developed a more positive attitude as their improved school attendance and effort resulted in better grades.

As a result of participating in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, the four participants in this study developed a new outlook on school attendance, as external factors and internal reflective thoughts influenced their attitude towards school attendance. Several external factors were cited as the influential reasons why the participants did not want to miss any more

days of school, including the influence of adults as well as not wanting to have to redo the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. By contrast, the internal reflective thoughts that were citied during the individual and small group interviews emerged as participants self-reflected on the consequences that could result from being truant. The participants used self-reflection to determine if they would attend school or not. These findings are not supported by the scant empirical literature on truancy court diversion programs, as the current literature on truancy court diversion programs focuses on quantitative research designs and does not examine participants' perceptions (Evans et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Giacomazzi et al., 2006; Huddleston & Shoenfelt, 2006).

Research Question 3

The purpose of research question 3 was to examine if the Project Reconnect Workshop helped participants to better understand the school district's policy for excused vs. unexcused absence, time period for submitting a legitimate excuse letter, and the guidelines for an excused absence. Considering that Participants 1 and 3 inconsistently reported having attended the Project Reconnect Workshop, a theme did not emerge for research question 3. However, Participant 2 consistently reported that she attended the workshop, while Participant 4 acknowledged that she did not attend it. Although Participant 2 attended the workshop, she reported that it was not beneficial, considering that she was already aware of the school district's attendance policy. By comparison, Participant 2 said that she was aware of school district's attendance policy, and she did not attend the workshop.

Research Question 4

What are the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker?

This study sought to identify the Project Reconnect participants' perceptions of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker. An analysis of the data for research question 4 found that only two of the four participants had weekly meetings with their assigned social worker, while another participant met with a teacher each week. Accountability and support emerged as the experiences that were common among all of the respondents. For example, the level of accountability that the participants described was instrumental in helping them to successfully complete the program, especially considering that the students knew that their assigned social worker or teacher was going to review (each week) the tracking sheet in the Project Reconnect Folder to ensure that the student was attending school, completing assignments, and complying with the school rules. Although the weekly check-in meetings were designed to monitor the participants' daily school attendance, completion of class assignments, and compliance with school rules, the findings indicated that the participants felt like the weekly check-in meetings provided them with support. As a result of the weekly check-in meetings, the participants were supported and empowered to assume the role and responsibility of being an active participant in their education. Similarly, weekly court ordered meetings with the truants' parents that included a review of the truants' grades and school attendance have been found to improve truants school attendance. This finding was illustrated in the Evans et al. (2010) study where the parents of truants in the Truancy Diversion Court Program in Springfield, Missouri had to attend 10 to 12 weekly sessions with the Truancy Court Team, support the recommendations of the Truancy Court Team, and provided documentation for their child's school absences. The judge reviewed the students' progress reports and school attendance each week, and Evans et al. (2010) found that truants levels of school attendance increased and were sustained for one semester after the intervention ended.

Conclusions

This study examined middle and high school truants' perceptions regarding how well the Project Reconnect Diversion Program impacted their improved school attendance, compliance with school rules, and completion of school assignments. The findings from this study revealed that the Project Reconnect Diversion Program was perceived to have positively impacted the participants' improved school attendance and better grades, while the program had a limited impact on the participants' compliance with school rules. As a result of participating in the Project Reconnect Diversion Program, the findings revealed that the participants developed new behaviors along with a positive attitude and new outlook on school attendance and academics. Overall, the identified factors that influenced the participants' improved school attendance and grades were of an external and internal nature.

Participants' responses to research question 4 revealed that the participants' level of accountability increased as a result of the weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker or teacher. These participants gained the necessary actions to gain control over their situation as the assigned social worker or teacher encouraged and monitored the participants' school attendance, grades, and compliance with classroom assignments. The researcher also found that the participants' weekly check-in meetings with their assigned social worker or teacher played a vital role in helping the participants to successfully complete the program, especially considering that the students were empowered and felt supported by the adults.

Implications

Based on the findings in this study, several implications are noted for educational leaders.

1. The evidence from this study suggests that truancy diversion programs that include daily and weekly monitoring of middle and high school truants' school attendance, completion of classroom assignments, and compliance with school rules can produce positive

outcomes that increase school attendance, student achievement, and student engagement provided that the adult responsible for that monitoring completes that responsibility.

2. The findings of this study suggest that mandatory weekly check-in meetings with the truant and an assigned social worker or teacher is a forum that can potentially empower middle and high school truants to successfully complete truancy diversion programs.

3. The results of this study support the idea that truancy diversion programs can positively impact middle and high school truants' outlook on school attendance and effort to achieve better grades.

4. The results of this study suggest indicate that truancy diversion programs can empower middle and high school truants to adopt positive behaviors and new routines that will lead to increased school attendance.

Taken together, these implications suggest that a successful middle and high school model for retention and graduation must include the monitoring of truants' school attendance and grades, along with weekly mandatory check-in meetings with the truant's assigned social worker or teacher. The implications of this study are timely considering that the recently adopted Juvenile Justice Reform legislation (House Bill 242) in Georgia has substantially revised, streamlined, and modernized provisions relating to juvenile proceedings for cases regarding children who are need of services (Children in Need of Services, 2013).

Under House Bill 242, a truant is defined as a student having ten or more unexcused absences from school in the current academic year, and the truant is referred to as a Child in Need of Services or CHINS. As a result of this legislation, the legally liable school district is required to resolve (and document the type of intervention to address the issue) the expressed problem through available educational approaches prior to submitting the child's name to the multiagency staffing panel that will develop an intervention plan to address the truancy.

Subsequently, the findings of this study indicate that policies regarding truancy need to be changed at the state level in Georgia to also include comprehensive middle and high school models for retention and graduation that mandate the daily monitoring of truants' school attendance and grades along with weekly meetings with an assigned social worker or teacher. The results of this study suggest that these variables can decrease truancy and the school dropout rate, while increasing student achievement.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following recommendations for further study are based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the research.

1. Further research utilizing a mixed method research design with a larger sample of students should be conducted to determine the generalizability or effectiveness of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program.

2. In order to expand the number of participants who are scheduled to attend the individual interviews and small group meetings, future researchers should send reminders to the participants and their parents via a standard (which would include the meeting date, time, and location) email, text message, and phone call on the day before and the day of the meetings.

3. In the future, a monitoring component for the truants' attendance at the Project Reconnect Workshop must be developed to ensure that the truant and his or her parent completes that mandatory component of the program. Also, this component must include a method to notify the court of the participant's non-attendance at the workshop.

4. In the future, an accountability mechanism must be implemented to ensure that the assigned social worker adheres to the mandatory weekly check-in meetings with the truant.

5. Considerably more work must done to ensure that the critical reader is appropriately trained to perform open coding when reading interview transcripts.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings in this study offer more insight and intervention for a population that is challenging to engage in the school setting. The researcher's passion as a school social worker and employee in the study school district has been devoted to finding solutions to reconnect truants to school and to teaching and learning. Therefore, it is rewarding and humbling to know that participants in the Project Reconnect Program did not only report the academic benefits of participating in the program, but they also matured and acquired a new outlook on the importance of education. This is what education is all about, helping students to see and understand the bigger picture and how decisions impact life. Thus, the researcher is convinced that middle and high school administrators should develop and implement comprehensive models of retention that include monitoring truants' school attendance and grades, along with the implementation of school-based mentorship.

REFERENCES

Babbie, E. R., & Rubin, A. (2005). *Research for social work*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning, Inc.

Barrett, D. E., Katsiyannis, A., Willson, V. W., & Zhange, D. (2007). Truancy offenders in the juvenile justice system: Examinations of first and second referrals. *Remedial and Special Education*, *28*(4), 244-256. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer?vid= 19&hid=119&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Barry, A. E., Chaney, B., & Chaney, J. (2011). The impact of truant and alcohol-related behavior on educational aspirations: A study of US high school seniors. *Journal of School Health*, *81*(8), 485-492. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00618.x

Borg, W. R., Gail, J. P., & Gail, M. D. (8th Ed.). (2007). *Educational research: An introduction*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513-531. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=3af25599-8d1d-47f1-9098cd7ef1927aa5%40sessionmgr14&vid=5&hid= 126

Burgess, C. (1976). The goddess, the school book, and compulsion. *Harvard Educational Review*, *46(2)*, 199-206. Retrieved from http://ejscontent.ebsco.com.libez. lib.georgia southern.edu/ContentServer.aspx?target=http%3A%2F%2Fhepg%2Emetapress%2Ecom%2Findex%2FML3122571205596T%2Epdf

Christle, A., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education*, *28*(6), 325-339. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=7e8d5c9d-4d74-4730-bed2-00fb507b437c%40sessionmgr10&vid=5&hid=14

Cole, R., DeSocio, J., Hewitt, G., Kitzman, H., Nelson, L. A., & VanCura, M. (2007). Engaging truant adolescents: Results from a multifaceted intervention pilot. *Preventing School Failure*, *51*(3), 3-11. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfewer?vid=17&hid=119&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Constable, R., Flynn, J. P., & McDonald, S. (5th Ed.). (2002). *School social work, practice, policy, and research perspectives*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.

Correa, Y., Dimmick, J., Liazis, A., & McMichael, H. (2011). "Playing hooky": Examining factors that contribute to adolescent truancy. *Sociological Viewpoints*, *27*, 15-23. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=87eeaa0a-9a8b-42e8-be35-ad3bc70e5757%40sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=113

Crewswell, J. S. (3rd Ed.) (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Davidson, J., Edward, S., Malcolm, H., & Wilson, V. (2008). 'Bunking off': The impact of truancy on pupils and teachers. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34, 1-17. doi:10.1080/01411920701492191

Dupper, D. R. (2003). *School social work: Skills and interventions for effective practice.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Evans, C. J., Hendricks, M. A., McKinley, L. & Sale, E. W. (2010). Evaluation of a truancy court intervention in four middle schools. *Psychology in Schools*, 47, 173-183. doi:10.1002/pits.20462

Fantuzzo, J., Grim, S., & Hazan, H. (2005). Project Start: An evaluation of a community-wide school-based intervention to reduce truancy. *Psychology in Schools*, *42*, 657-667. doi:10.1002/pits.20103.

Gastic, B. (2008). School truancy and the disciplinary problems of bullying victims. *Educational Review*, 60, 391-404. doi10.1080/00131910802393423

Gavin, J. L. (2009). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences*. (4th). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak.

Georgia Compulsory Attendance, O.C.G.A. 20-2-690.1 (2010). Retrieved from http://web.lexisnexis.com/research/retrieve?_m=f2372cbebe77c5c63225ae2b5a5c65a1&_b…

Giacomazzi, A., Mueller, D., & Stoddard, C. (2006). Dealing with chronic absenteeism and its related consequences: The process and short-term effects of a diversionary juvenile court intervention. *Journal Of Education For Students Placed At Risk*, *11*(2), 199-219. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15 &hid=119& & sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Gottfried, M. A. (2009). Excused versus unexcused: How student absences in elementary school affect academic achievement. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31, 392-415. doi:10.3102/0162373709342467

Greenbaum, P. E., Massey, O. T., & Yampolskaya, S. (2006). At-risk high school students in the "gaining early awareness and readiness program" (gear up: academic and behavioral outcomes). *The Journal of Primary Intervention*, 27, 457-475. doi:10.1007/s10935-006-0050-z

Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Michael, E. W. (2006). Protective family factors in context of neighborhood: Promoting positive school outcomes. *Family Relations*, *55*(1), 93-104. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110&vid=10&hid=119

Haugland, S., Mounteney, J., & Skutle, A. (2010). Truancy, alcohol use and alcohol-related problems in secondary school pupils in Norway. *Health Education Research*, 25, 945-954. doi 10.1093/her/cyq044

Heidemann, S. L., Rewey, K. L., Rodrique, M. C., & Zimmerman, S. S. (2008). The impact of an early literacy initiative on the long term academic success of diverse students. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 13, 452-481. doi:101080/10824660802427744

Henry, H. (2010). Skipping school and using drugs: A brief report. Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy, *17*(5), 650-657. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=126&sid=45554876-b76f-4994-8b83c98e01dee78%40sessionmgr12

Henry, K. L. (2007). Who's skipping school: Characteristics of truants in 8th and 10th grade. *Journal of School Health*, *77*(1), 29-35. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/resultsadvanced?sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110&vid=20&hid=11&bquery=(Who%e2%80%99s+skipping+school)&bdata=JmRiPWVyaWMmY2xpMD1EVDEmY2x2MD0yMDA3MDEtMjAwNzEyJnR5cGU9MSZzaXRlPWVob3N0LWxpdmU%3d

Henry, K. L., & Huizinga, D. H. (2007). School-related risk and protective factors associated with truancy among urban youth placed at risk. *J Primary Prevention*, 28, 505-519. doi:10.1007/s10935-007-0115-7

Henry, K. L., Huizinga, D. H., & Thornberry, T. P. (2009). A discrete-time survival analysis of the relationship between truancy and the onset of marijuana use. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, *70*(1), 5-15. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ ehost/ pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=45554876-b76f-4994-8b82 3c98e01dee78%40sessionmgr12&vid=7&hid=17

Henry, K. L., & Thornberry, T. P. (2010). Truancy and escalation of substance use during adolescence. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, *71*(1), 115-124. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=8&hid=119&sid=45554876-b76f-4994-8b82-3c98e01dee78%40sessionmgr12

Jennison, V., Hightower, P., Lawrence, S., & Lawther, W. (2011). An evaluation of the early truancy intervention (ETI) program. *School Social Work Journal*, 35(2), 57-71. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&hid=113&sid=e9ef2 84f-1559-4f34-85d0-3e1cce996c9b%40sessionmgr10

Hopko, D. R., & Hunt, M. K. (2009). Predicting high school truancy among students in the Appalachian south. *J Primary Prevention*, *30*, 549-567. doi:10.1007/s10935-009-0187-7

Horejsi, C. R., & Sheafor, B. W. (2011). *Techniques and guidelines for social work practice*. (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Huddleston, M. R., & Shoenfelt, E. L. (2006). The truancy court diversion program of the family court, warren circuit division III, Bowling Green, Kentucky: An evaluation of impact on attendance and academic performance. *Family Court Review*, *44*(4),683-695. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=123&sid=8cf54a 78-4fb1-49ed-90a0-e2112f84960f%40sessionmgr114

Kadushin, A. (1972). *The social work interview*. London: Columbia University Press.

Katz, M. S. (1976). A history of compulsory education laws. *Fastback Series*, *75*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED119389.pdf

Kearney, C. (2008). An interdisciplinary model of school absenteeism in youth to inform professional practice and public policy. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20, 257-282. doi:10.1007/s10648-008-9078-3

Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Zastrow, C. H. (8th Ed.). (2004). *Understanding human behavior and the social environment*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

LaMorte, M. W. (2005). *School law cases and concepts*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Lindstadt, M. A., (2005). Employing mediation to approach truants. *Family Court Review*, *43*(2), 303-322. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=10 &hid=1 23&sid=8cf54a78-4fb1-49ed-90a0-e2112f84960f%40sessionmgr114

Marvul, J. N. (2012). If you build it, they will come: A successful truancy intervention program in a small high school. *Urban Education*, *47*(1), 144-169. Retrieved from http://web.ebsc ohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=b2be636e-f55c-40db-bc5d-7fa053d40e3d%40sessionmgr112 &vid=4&hid=110

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

MacMillan, J. (2012). *Educational research: Fundamentals for consumer*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Nesbit, E. (1976). *The right to go to school: The development of school social services in Georgia*. School Social Workers of Georgia, Inc.

Pellegrini, D. W.(2007). School non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23, 63-77. doi:10.1080/ 02 667360601154691

Provasnik, S. (2006). Judicial activism and the origins of parental choice: The court's role in the institutionalization of compulsory education in the United States,1891-1925. *History of Education Quarterly*, *46*(3), 311-347. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf viewer/pdfviewer?vid=34&hid=123&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Reid, K. (2005). The causes, views and traits of school absenteeism and truancy: An analytical view. *Research in Education 74*, 59-82. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost /pdfviewer /pdfviewer?vid=36&hid=123&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Reid, K.(2008). The causes of non-attendance: An empirical study. *Educational Review*, *60*(4), 345-357. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer ?vid =38 &hid=123&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Reid, K. (2009). The National Behaviour and Attendance Review in Wales Findings and recommendations on school attendance. *Research In Education*, *81*, 20-42. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&hid=10&sid=87ee aa0a- 9a8b-42e8-be35-ad3bc70e5757%40sessionmgr111

Richtman, K. S. (2007). The truancy intervention program of the Ramsey County attorney's office: A Collaborative approach to school success. *Family Court Review*, *45*(3), 421-437. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid= 4&hid =24&sid=d0849a 6b-0201-4bb7-9a5c-f59c0ab1e462%40sessionmgr12

Sheldon, S. B. (2007). Improving student attendance with school, family, and community partnerships. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *100*(5), 267-275. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=42&hid=123&sid=234de92a-a5dd-4c54-935f-cbb32b7e4290%40sessionmgr110

Spencer, A. M. (2009). School attendance patterns, unmet educational needs, and truancy: A chronological perspective. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30, 309-319. doi:10.11 7/0741932508321017

Student Attendance Code, 160-5-1-.10 (2007).

Yin, R. K. (3rd Ed.). (2003). *Case study research, design, and methods*. Newbury, Park: Sage Publications, Inc.

Zhang, M. M. (2003). Links between school absenteeism and child poverty. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *21*(1), 10-17. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer /pd fviewer?vid=23&hid=106&sid=56cf6223-c756-47d1-be00-1fb4271fa4b5%40session

APPENDIX A

PROJECT RECONNECT PROGRAM: ENGAGING TRUANT ADOLESCENTS THROUGH
PRE-COURT DIVERSION

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before we begin this interview, I must include a brief consent statement. The contents of this project will be analyzed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Georgia Southern University.

All identifying information will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by state or federal law. Should any information about this interview be published, pseudo names or numbers will be used to protect the identity of all participants. This project is about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program and is for research and educational purposes only. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions that I will ask.

There is a possibility that you could experience minimal discomforts and risks when talking about truancy. Therefore, should you feel uncomfortable during the interviews, you may decline to answer any question(s) and stop participating at anytime without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide not participate in this study.

This interview will be audio recorded, and notes taken throughout. Do I have your permission to continue? Now, I am going to give you an assigned number, which should be stated prior to responding to any questions, comments or suggestions that you would like to offer during the interview.

Interview Semi-structured Questions

1. What is your overall impression of the Project Reconnect Program:
   a. Like most
   b. Dislike most
   c. Strengths
   d. Weaknesses
   e. Suggested changes

2. How has the Project Reconnect Program impacted your:
   a. School attendance
   b. Compliance with school rules
   c. Completion of classroom assignments and homework

3. What, if any effect, has the Project Reconnect Program had on your academic performance in school:
   a. Grades
   b. Studying habits

4. Did the Project Reconnect Program have any effect on your relationships:
   a. with adults? If so, how?
   b. with peers in school? If so, how?

5. Did the Project Reconnect Program help you to overcome?
   a. Skipping school
   b. Tardiness
   c. Difficulty establishing a routine

6. Did the Project Reconnect Workshop help you to better understand the school district's policy for:
   a. Excused absence vs. unexcused absence
   b. Time period for submitting a legitimate excuse letter
   c. Guidelines for an excused absence

7. Did participating in the Project Reconnect Workshop help you prevent obtaining more unexcused absences? If so, how?

8. What are your thoughts about the helpfulness of the weekly check-in meetings with your assigned social worker?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience with the Project Reconnect Program?

10. If you were to create your own Project Reconnect Program on today, how would it look? Would it look similar to the Program that you completed or would you modify some of the components?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (2 Participants)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Dear _____,

My name is Trevis Killen and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student at Georgia Southern University. As a requirement for my doctoral degree in educational administration, I will be conducting a research project entitled, Project Reconnect Program: Engaging Truant Adolescents Through Pre-Court Diversion. I am requesting your permission to include (*your child*) as a participant in this project.

The purpose of this research is to examine the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program's influence on truant students who completed the program during the 2010-2011 school year. To achieve this goal, I will pilot test the interview question that will be used to question participations about their perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. By practicing the interview, I will be able to check the wording of the interview questions to see if students understand the questions.

Participation in this research will include the completion of one face-to-face interview meeting. I will conduct the face-to-face interview meeting in the Elberta Center's cafeteria, during the school district's 2013 spring semester. Should you consent for your child to participate in my study, here is what would happen: I will interview (*your child*) to find out about *(his/her)* perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's goals to inspire truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. The face-to-face interview will last for one hour or less. I will tape record the interviews and transcribe the comments for future reference.

There is a possibility that your child could experience minimal discomforts and risks as a participant in this study. The minimal discomforts and risks could include embarrassment or discomfort when talking about truancy, or hearing others talk about truancy. Should this occur, then your child would be referred to the school psychologist.

By participating in this study, (*your child*) would contribute to the primary research on truancy court diversion programs, by responding to the interview guide questions. In addition, the benefits to society is that the information acquired from this study can be used to reduced truancy among truant middle and high school students, which is an essential step in increasing student achievement.

Any identifying information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Some of the safeguards will be that identification codes will be used rather than the students name on all data collected. All data including the master list of participants with their name and identification code will be

secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office for a maximum of three years. When the study is reported only aggregated data will be used to report the findings, so that individual answers will not be identifiable.

Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

Compensation: <u>The researcher will give the student participant a $10 Amazon gift card for participating in the face-to-face interview, and the participant's parent will receive a $20 gas gift card. Do you object to *(Your child) receiving a $20 Amazon gift card*</u>?

Voluntary Participation: *(Your child's)* participation in this study is voluntary. *(Your child)* will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which *(your child)* are otherwise entitled if you decided that *(he/she)* will not participate in this study. If *(your child)* decide(s) to participate in this study*(he/she)* may discontinue participation at any time by telling the researcher, without penalty or retribution. Additionally, participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to answer during the course of this study.

I am asking your permission for your child to participate in this study, and will provide *(him/her)* with a simplified "assent" letter/verbal description before enrolling them in this study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H13210.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (8 Participants)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Dear _____,

My name is Trevis Killen and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student at Georgia Southern University. As a requirement for my doctoral degree in educational administration, I will be conducting a research project entitled, Project Reconnect Program: Engaging Truant Adolescents Through Pre-Court Diversion. I am requesting your permission to include (*your child*) as a participant in this project.

The purpose of this research is to examine the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program's influence on truant students who completed the program during the 2010-2011 school year. In particular, I will be asking whether the Project Reconnect Program inspired (your child) to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments.

If you give permission, (your child) will have the opportunity to participate in one face-to-face interview and one group discussion. I will conduct the face-to-face interview meeting and group discussion in the Student Services' cafeteria, during the school district's 2013 spring semester. Should you consent for your child to participate in my study, here is what would happen: I will interview (*your child*) to find out about *(his/her)* perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's goals to inspire truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. The face-to-face interview will last for one hour or less, and the one group discussion will last for two hours or less. I will tape record the interviews and transcribe the comments for future reference.

There is a possibility that your child could experience minimal discomforts and risks as a participant in this study. The minimal discomforts and risks could include embarrassment or discomfort when talking about truancy, or hearing others talk about truancy. Should this occur, then your child would be referred to the school psychologist.

By participating in this study, (*your child*) would contribute to the primary research on truancy court diversion programs, by responding to the interview guide questions. In addition, the benefits to society is that the information acquired from this study can be used to reduced truancy among truant middle and high school students, which is an essential step in increasing student achievement.

Any identifying information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Some of the safeguards will be that identification codes will be used rather than the students name on all data collected. All data including the master list of participants with their name and identification code will be secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office for a maximum of three years. When the study is reported only aggregated data will be used to report the findings, so that individual answers will not be identifiable.

Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

Compensation: The researcher will give the student participant a $20 Amazon gift card for participating in the face-to-face interview, and the participant's parent will receive a $30 gas gift card. Do you object to *(Your child) receiving a $20 Amazon gift card*?

Voluntary Participation: *(Your child's)* participation in this study is voluntary. *(Your child)* will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which *(your child)* are otherwise entitled if you decided that *(he/she)* will not participate in this study. If *(your child)* decide(s) to participate in this study*(he/she)* may discontinue participation at any time by telling the researcher, without penalty or retribution. However, participants who withdraw from the study will receive a move gift card but will not be invited to the pizza party. Additionally, participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to answer during the course of this study.

I am asking your permission for your child to participate in this study, and will provide *(him/her)* with a simplified "assent" letter/verbal description before enrolling them in this study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H13210.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX D

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM (2 PARTICIPANTS)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Dear Parent or Guardian:

A study will be conducted at your child's school district in the next few weeks. The purpose of this research is to examine the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program's influence on truant students who completed the program during the 2010-2011 school year. To achieve this goal, I will pilot test the interview questions that will be used to ask participations about their perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversionary Program. By practicing the interview, I will be able to check the wording of the interview questions to see if students understand the questions.

Participation in this research will include the completion of one face-to-face interview meeting. I will conduct the face-to-face interview meeting in the Student Services' cafeteria, during the school district's 2013 spring semester. Should you consent for your child to participate in my study, here is what would happen: I will interview (*your child*) to find out about *(his/her)* perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's goals to inspire truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. In response, (*your child*) will have an opportunity to respond to nine opened-ended questions that I will read about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The face-to-face interview will last for one hour or less, and the one group discussion will last for two hours or less. I will tape record the interviews and transcribe the comments for future reference.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. In addition, there is a possibility that your child could experience minimal discomforts and risks as a participant in this study. The minimal discomforts and risks could include embarrassment or discomfort when talking about truancy, or hearing others talk about truancy. Should this occur, then your child would be referred to the school psychologist. However, your child will be told that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her/his participation.

In order to protect the confidentiality of *(your child)*, a number and not the child's name will appear on all of the information recorded during the study. All information pertaining to the study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. No one at your child's school will see the information recorded about your child.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact Mr. Trevis Killen, Ed.S., Educational Administration major, or Dr. Kymberly Harris-Drawdy, advisor.

To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu. This project has been reviewed by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H13210.

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the experiment, please sign the form below and place it in the self-addressed envelope, and mail it as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your time.

Trevis Killen, Ed.S.   Dr. Kymberly Harris-Drawdy
Educational Administration   Teaching and Learning
                                                                    Associate Professor

Investigator's Signature_____

Child's Name: _____

Parent or Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM (8 PARTICIPANTS)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Dear Parent or Guardian:

A study will be conducted at your child's school district in the next few weeks. The purpose of the study is to examine the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's influence on students who completed this program in the 2010-2011 school year. In particular, I will be asking nine open-ended questions to evaluate if the Project Reconnect Program inspired *(your child)* to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments.

If you give permission, (your child) will have the opportunity to participate in one face-to-face interview and one group discussion. I will conduct the face-to-face interview meeting and group discussion in the Student Services' cafeteria, during the school district's 2013 spring semester. Should you consent for your child to participate in my study, here is what would happen: I will interview *(your child)* to find out about *(his/her)* perceptions of the Project Reconnect Diversion Program's goals to inspire truant middle and high school students to attend school, to comply with school rules, and to complete class assignments. In response, (*your child*) will have an opportunity to respond to nine opened-ended questions that I will read about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. The face-to-face interview will last for one hour or less, and the one group discussion will last for two hours or less. I will tape record the interviews and transcribe the comments for future reference.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. In addition, there is a possibility that your child could experience minimal discomforts and risks as a participant in this study. The minimal discomforts and risks could include embarrassment or discomfort when talking about truancy, or hearing others talk about truancy. Should this occur, then your child would be referred to the school psychologist. However, your child will be told that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her/his participation.

In order to protect the confidentiality of *(your child)*, a number and not the child's name will appear on all of the information recorded during the study. All information pertaining to the study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's residence. No one at your child's school will see the information recorded about your child.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact Mr. Trevis Killen, Ed.S., Educational Administration major, or Dr. Kymberly Harris-Drawdy, advisor.

To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu. This project has been reviewed by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number <mark>H13210.</mark>

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the experiment, please sign the form below and place it in the self-addressed envelope, and mail it as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your time.

Trevis Killen, Ed.S.   Dr. Kymberly Harris-Drawdy
Educational Administration   Teaching and Learning
                                                        Associate Professor

Investigator's Signature_____

Child's Name: _____

Parent or Guardian's Signature: _____

Date:_____

APPENDIX F

MINOR'S ASSENT FORM (2 PARTICIPANTS)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Hello,

I am Mr. Trevis Killen, a graduate student at Georgia Southern University and I am conducting a study on the Project Reconnect Program: Engaging Truant Adolescents Through Pre-Court Diversion.

You are being asked to participate in a project that will be used to learn about truancy. If you agree to be part of the project, you will participate in one face-to-face interview. The face-to-face interview will take approximately one hour or less. During the interview I will ask you nine questions about your experience with the Project Reconnect Program. In response, you will have an opportunity to respond to the questions that I will read about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. I will tape record the interviews and write out the comments for future reference. After the conclusion of the face-to-face interview, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card as a thank you for participating.

You do not have to do this project. You can stop whenever you want. If you do not want to answer some or any of the questions, that is ok, and you can stop at any point without any consequences. Even if your parents have said you can or should participate, your decision to participate is completely up to you.

Your participation in the study and all information you provide is confidential. This means that none of the teachers or other people at your school will know about your answers to my questions. All materials from the study will be kept in a locked cabinet, and only I will see your answers. I am not going to put your name on the answers that you give me, so no one will be able to know which responses were yours.

Thank you!

If you understand the information above and want to participate in the project, please sign your name on the line below:

Yes, I will participate in this project: _____

Child's Name: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX G

MINOR'S ASSENT FORM (8 PARTICIPANTS)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Hello,

I am Mr. Trevis Killen, a graduate student at Georgia Southern University and I am conducting a study on the Project Reconnect Program: Engaging Truant Adolescents Through Pre-Court Diversion.

You are being asked to participate in a project that will be used to learn about truancy. If you agree to be part of the project, you will participate in one face-to-face interview and one group discussion. The face-to-face interview will take approximately one hour or less, and the group discussion will take approximately two hours. During the interview I will ask you nine questions about your experience with the Project Reconnect Program. In response, you will have an opportunity to respond to the questions that I will read about the Project Reconnect Diversion Program. I will tape record the interviews and write out the comments for future reference. After the conclusion of the face-to-face interview, you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card as a thank you for participating.

You do not have to do this project. You can stop whenever you want. If you do not want to answer some or any of the questions, that is ok, and you can stop at any point without any consequences. Even if your parents have said you can or should participate, your decision to participate is completely up to you.

Your participation in the study and all information you provide is confidential. This means that none of the teachers or other people at your school will know about your answers to my questions. All materials from the study will be kept in a locked cabinet, and only I will see your answers. I am not going to put your name on the answers that you give me, so no one will be able to know which responses were yours.

Thank you!

If you understand the information above and want to do the project, please sign your name on the line below:

Yes, I will participate in this project: _____

Child's Name: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____