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School Social Workers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Truancy Interventions for Primary School Students

Laniesha Stephens-Dunn
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Laniesha Stephens-Dunn

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

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Primary School Students

by

Laniesha Stephens-Dunn

MSW, Walden University, 2017

BSW, Virginia State University, 2014

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

Academic performance is a growing concern for students in kindergarten through Grade 3 (K-3) in the United States, especially those students with a high number of unauthorized absences (i.e., a high truancy rate). When students are absent from school, they may have a lower chance of succeeding academically compared to students with better attendance. School social workers can help these students address barriers to attendance, such as student or family member health, poverty, and psychological and social concerns, and could benefit from more insight on how to effectively engage parents, students, school personnel, and community agencies in eliminating truancy. The focus of this research was on exploring school social workers' perceptions of effective truancy interventions provided for primary school students in Grades K-3. The theoretical framework consisted of systems theory and empowerment theory. As part of this action research study, 12 school social workers in the U.S. state of Virginia shared their experience of being a part of an interdisciplinary team and related their perceptions of their role in addressing truancy. Analysis of data from individual interviews, surveys, and focus groups revealed four themes (assessment of truancy in K-3, enforcement of the state's compulsory attendance law, the impact of truancy, and reduction of truancy) and identified several effective truancy strategies. The implications for positive social change for social work policy and practice include a potential increase in teacher and parental engagement and the identification of effective intervention strategies to decrease the rates of chronic truancy.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the school social workers providing support to students, families, and schools to increase daily school attendance. As a school social worker in Virginia, I was motivated to conduct this research to identify effective interventions to decrease truancy. As school social workers, we serve as the link between the school, home, and community settings. Our role and responsibility in addressing daily school attendance are to ensure each student regularly attends, as attendance is a significant factor in one's academic success. My research is also intended to guide parents, school personnel, and additional stakeholders on the importance of collaboration to demonstrate practical problem-solving around truancy. Continuing my duties as a school social worker, it is my goal that this research will enhance problem-solving efforts and professional growth in social work.

Lastly, I am dedicating this research to my late grandfather Edward C. Carrington. In 2010, a few months into undergrad, my grandfather unexpectedly passed away. Considering him as my guardian angel, I vowed that I would continue to further my education to the best of my ability to continue his legacy and be a great support to my family.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank God for guiding me throughout this fulfilling journey and ensuring that I remained humble and positive. To my kind, loving husband (Kiero), daughter (Nyla), and son (Kyrie) for the continued motivation, encouragement, and support. Thank you each for never giving up on me. I am also sharing praises to my amazing family, friends, and coworkers. Thank you for the countless affirmations, daily conversations, and belief in my abilities. This journey allowed me to recognize new strengths, despite the tribulations faced. As my grandmother (Esther) also shared, “delay is not denial.” For that, I have learned to trust in God’s timing and be patient with things I want to accomplish in life. To my committee, I could not have completed this process without your guidance and constructive feedback. It amazes me how blessed I am to say that I have worked and collaborated with amazing social workers. Throughout this journey, I have learned so much about myself, and now that it has come to an end, I have also realized that it will continue to open up many opportunities. I am forever appreciative and officially proud to say that I am DONE! Thank you, God, for my support system!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Introduction

School social workers are a critical link between school, home, and the community. In their work with students and their families, school social workers are consistently focusing on ways to improve academic achievement and address social, emotional behaviors while seeking to ensure equitable educational opportunities (NASW, 2017). In this project, I explored the challenges that school social workers experience when working with parents and other school personnel to determine effective truancy strategies to help address chronic truancy. This action research study focused on school social workers' perceptions of providing higher-level interventions, such as completing attendance plans and offering assistance in filing court petitions. I focused on school social workers who work with families and primary school students enrolled in kindergarten through Grade 3 (K-3) in the U.S. state of Virginia.

This project aimed to identify how school social workers provide services to chronically truant students without a legitimate excuse for their absences during early elementary education. the context of inconsistent services, assessing school social workers' perceptions may help leaders in the field to address external barriers to education for primary school students experiencing emotional, family, psychological, mental, and other environmental trauma or issues. When students are habitually absent, it is important to identify the reason for nonattendance through corrective action (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2005). By conducting action research, I hope to better understand the perceptions of various school social workers employed in different school

divisions. An aim of this research is to identify comprehensive supports that address the crisis, social-emotional learning, bullying, and targeting students who are at risk for truancy in Virginia. School social workers provide individual and mental health services to improve student's well-being and address the foundational reasons for low academic achievement (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). The services provided can help treat chronic truancy as truancy continues to rise amongst students in Grades K-3 in Virginia. Collaborating with school social workers will allow for a better understanding of the specialized field of practice that contributes to the standards of practice in social work.

Background of Social Work Problem

School social workers use a wide range of evidence-based approaches to overcome various barriers. Collaboration with parents and teachers is one of these approaches. A growing body of research has emerged on the degree to which collaboration helps to address truancy (Elsherbiny, 2017). Earlier studies have documented the influence of parent and teacher support when addressing chronic absenteeism (Mallet, 2016). The compulsory attendance law in the state of Virginia mandates children between the ages of 5 to 18 to attend school unless otherwise excused or deemed appropriate (VDOE, 2017). School social workers are a part of an interdisciplinary team that provides support in closing performance gaps between student subgroups. To be successful in this endeavor, team members need to collaborate with parents and teachers, who have an active role in a student's life by employing regulations, reinforcing rules, and encouraging social responsibility (VDOE, 2017).

There is a difference between truancy and chronic truancy under Virginia law. A student is truant when they receive one unexcused absence from school but becomes a chronic truant when they surpass a specific number of unexcused absences (VDOE, 2017). The compulsory attendance law in Virginia does not explicitly define truancy and does not identify a particular number of unexcused absences to determine a student as being truant. When a student is habitually absent without parental awareness, they are labeled a child in need of supervision (CHINS) by the state (VDOE, 2017). In addition, VDOE (2017) identified a difference between chronic truancy and chronic absenteeism in that the latter incorporates all excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions. Chronic absenteeism relates to understandable issues, which include medical issues, homelessness, or lack of transportation. When students are excessively absent from school, there is a loss of instructional time. What helps to address attendance is the collaboration and communication between the school and parents. The partnership helps to address underlying problems before there is an increase of unexcused absences and the need for school social work intervention (VDOE, 2017).

Given this broader focus, truancy may be defined differently in other states and districts. One main common factor for many states and districts focuses on the extenuating circumstances where there is no indication that the parent support or is aware of the student's absences (Maynard et al. 2017). The ability to identify gaps in effective truancy programming may benefit the field of social work. In the introduction, I provided background information on this social work problem and discussed risk and protective factors, which include school factors, family factors, and economic factors, as critical

components for effective truancy programming. Through an action research methodology, I explored the concerns and issues that school social workers face when identifying logical reasons for the causes, solutions, and effects of chronic truancy.

Problem Statement

In 2015-2016, approximately 7 million students in the United States missed 15 or more days of school, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Being absent from school 10% or more school days corresponds to 18 days absent each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education (2019) identified chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools as a hidden educational crisis. Absenteeism is recognized by various educators and local officials as a key issue. Yet, despite considerable efforts, there continues to be an increase in chronic truancy, which differs from chronic absenteeism. School social workers are assigned to work with various age groups who face emotional and social barriers that hinder their opportunity to be academically successful.

Truancy continues to increase as mental health problems, personal challenges, and other factors challenge students' attendance, leading to the onset of chronic truancy. The pervasiveness of mental health problems has affected school attendance globally (Dembo et al. 2016). This is manifested in a lack of motivation, deficits with remaining attentive, and cognitive impairments. The gap in local social work practice concerns efforts to identify effective truancy programs that will engage students to attend school. The concerns of truancy are associated with the compulsory attendance law. According to Reyes (2020), truancy continues to be an issue in today's society because daily school

attendance is at the center of U.S. educational policy. Compulsory school attendance is premised on parental responsibility; however, the battle against chronic truancy requires collaboration with schools, local service providers, juvenile court systems, and the community (Miller & Johnson, 2016).

Additionally, truancy increases the rates of elementary- and secondary-level student dropout and prevents postsecondary educational attainment (Reyes, 2020). Truancy is a social issue that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries as U.S. states enacted compulsory attendance laws mandating school attendance (Reyes, 2020). In 2009, Dube and Orpinas noted that an understanding of absenteeism and its relationship to academic achievement is imperative to improving the harmful consequences that are associated with absenteeism. Current studies on truancy in the United States support this assertion. Maynard et al. (2017) recommended a more differentiated approach, however, to address factors associated with truancy. Illustrating this approach, school social workers in Virginia focus on providing mental health services to students when addressing the psychological and social well-being of students. A lack of involvement from parents and teachers, however, may complicate these efforts.

With the implementation of Virginia's compulsory attendance law, each school district develops its protocol that addresses the responsibility of school personnel and the actions taken against truant students. Virginia and other U.S. states continue to struggle with implementing effective truancy interventions to help increase student attendance. According to VDOE, 2017, when students miss instruction, regardless of if the absences are excused or unexcused, it can still impact academic achievement. The broader

emphasis focuses on improving daily attendance and using basic strategies, including engaging parents, recognizing good and improved attendance, monitoring progress, outreach, and programs (VDOE, 2017).

School social workers receive support from the coordination amongst teachers and other school personnel; however, these efforts are hampered when parents become less involved in their children's school performance (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). School social workers often collaborate with truancy officers, school counselors, community mental health agencies, and court services to address attendance. Although some school divisions employ school social workers for different purposes, many school social workers often take on the role of being a truancy officer. Based on my personal experience and professional interaction as a school social worker in a small locality, my school division has an effective attendance procedure while following the compulsory attendance law. However, there continues to be a gap with the current interventions being provided based upon the division's school attendance affecting the status of school accreditation. The Virginia School Social Work Association (VASSW) hosts yearly conferences and professional development training where many school social workers share their concerns with addressing truancy as many experiences a lack of communication from parents and teachers.

Collaboration and communication are fundamental elements for school social workers working to address chronic truancy. In the early 19th and 20th centuries, school social workers were visiting teachers and historically reported as being a case manager and devoted time to individual and small-group work (Webber, 2018). There is a clear

need for evidence-based practice to guide school social worker interventions to reduce chronic truancy. Identifying and connecting with other school social workers can yield positive outcomes. Exploring school social workers' perceptions of what has worked to address truancy was a key aim of this action research project.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

In conducting this qualitative study, I sought to explore school social workers' challenges and perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy programming. I examined truancy interventions from the perspectives of school social workers; I was particularly interested in understanding participants' difficulties with creating or implementing an effective and cohesive conference attendance plan to address chronically absent students. This study may benefit school social workers and emphasize strategies to establish comprehensive interventions that focus on the critical components of truancy. Relevant collaboration on shared plans may emerge as a best practice in the primary educational setting.

In this study, I evaluated productive and unproductive strategies of school social workers to support and expand communication and collaboration in Virginia. Truancy is recognized in different ways in individual states and is perceived nationwide as one of the most critical issues fronting school systems today (Reyes, 2020). The VDOE expects students to succeed on educational tests such as the Standards of Learning; there is a lower chance of students passing if truancy rates are high (VDOE, 2019). This qualitative research may identify effective truancy interventions and barriers that impact a student's

academic success. Also, it may highlight the importance of students receiving school social work services. I sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are school social workers' perceptions on current contemporary truancy interventions, such as the development of a conference attendance plan?

RQ2: Which truancy interventions do school social workers find are most useful for primary school students in grade K-3rd?

Concepts, Goals, and Objectives

Key concepts that are central to this action research project are defined as follows:

Attendance conference: A conference that is held with the parent or guardian after the student has gained an additional unexcused absence after the development of the attendance plan where there is no parent support or awareness. The conference occurs in a face-to-face meeting or through other communication with the school social worker or assigned attendance officer.

Attendance plan: A plan developed by school personnel as action steps taken after the student's fifth unexcused absence. The attendance plan includes the parent and the student and works to address barriers while providing recommended school programs or outside community support.

Chronic absenteeism: Excused and unexcused absences and school suspensions based upon lost instructional time.

Court petition: Students who meet the criteria of having a CHINS petition filed with the juvenile court.

Family Assessment Planning Team (FAPT): A community support team comprised of local community members from agencies such as the department of social services, school representatives, community service board, mental health agency representatives, court services, and a comprehensive service act representative. FAPT members work to assess family needs and provide resources.

Primary school students: Youth ages 5-8 who are enrolled in Grades K-3.

Truancy: An unexcused absence from school. The Virginia Code §22.1-258 considers truant behavior to occur when a student fails to attend school and no parent support or awareness is indicated.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

I examined social work practice related to providing services in the school setting. School social workers in Virginia are also often licensed clinical social workers. Using a wide range of evidenced based practices, school social workers in Virginia are master's level trained to help address student mental health concerns, and professional strategies to enhance student outcomes. Also, social workers within the education field can apply to become a certified school social worker specialist. Examining perceptions of various barriers that impede student's attendance, each section will capture my journey to recognize the problem, analyze RQs and methodology, and provide a detailed literature review and theoretical framework to lead my research. This action research provides in-depth data analysis, findings, and recommendations that can be shared and applied to the profession of social work.

The VDOE school accreditation standards emphasize closing achievement gaps while providing a comprehensive outlook on improving school quality (VDOE, 2019). Absenteeism now impacts accreditation as Virginia makes no distinction between excused and unexcused absences. Once a student misses more than 10% of the school year, it is considered chronic absenteeism. In Virginia, school accreditation rates divided into three groups; accredited, accredited with conditions, and accreditation denied (VDOE, 2017). School attendance is a school quality and student success indicator and adds unique value towards the determination of a school remaining accredited. As a school social worker in Virginia, I engaged in this research to address the barriers of chronic truancy to help reduce the rates of chronic absenteeism.

I used the qualitative method to collect data from school social workers in Virginia. According to Ravitch and Carl, (2016), use of a qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. I used focus groups with the school social worker participants to discover and define the problem to determine probable resolutions. The goal of this methodology was to be in alignment with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2012) standards for school social work services by valuing the importance of collaboration and communication. Collaborating with other school social workers provided me with the opportunity to speculate and be a partner with the participants. I divided the 12 participants into two focus groups. Additional triangulation data points for the study included the use of an attendance questionnaire that included questions to identify the school social worker's knowledge on school attendance in Virginia. I provided the president of the VASSW with an electronic invitation letter to

share with prospective participants. As the facilitator of this action research project, I used my network to gain potential participants. It was my responsibility to follow the protocol when obtaining participants' informed consent by ensuring their understanding of the outlines of this action research project.

Significance of the Study

In this research, I sought to identify potential solutions to address chronic truancy; synthesize the literature on truancy interventions; and share insight on how parents, schools, and the community can help address how truancy affects a student's progress with education. This project is unique and may benefit school social workers. The ability to improve the collaboration process for students identified as being chronic truants may enhance the profession and is a responsibility of school social workers. School social workers may find the results of this study useful in addressing truancy with all students enrolled in primary and secondary schools, parents, and teachers.

Social Work Practice and Research

Chronic absenteeism and truancy are increasing among primary school students. School social workers are a vital part of the school system when working to identify the reasons for nonattendance. Findings of this research may further understanding of the importance of being compliant with the compulsory attendance law as mandated by the State of Virginia. The study has implications for policy and practice and theory. It pertains to the NASW (2021) code of ethics as the fundamental values include service, dignity, and worth of a person, integrity, and competence. It may also contribute to the

identification of effective intervention strategies to help strengthen one's well-being through assessment, planning, and development.

Social Change

Effectively addressing attendance plays a crucial role in the responsibility of a school social worker. This action research project may effect positive social change by yielding insight on the effectiveness of chronic truancy and ways to increase student, parent, and teacher involvement. Raising awareness and empowerment is necessary to decrease the rates of student absenteeism (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). I hope to provide useful knowledge that benefits school social workers in school districts in different states. According to the School Social Work Association of America (2018), the NASW Code of Ethics does not differentiate adult and minor clients. Therefore, in this project I examined the services and resources to ensure that all students have access to support and to acknowledge that parents have the legal and moral responsibility to ensure the student's best interest.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

For the theoretical framework, I used systems theory and empowerment theory. As applied to this study, system theory acknowledges that various systems impact students; it focuses on the interactions between systems, where the involvement from the school social workers stems from their use of interventions. Empowerment theory builds on the strengths, resiliency, and resources of individuals (in this case, school personnel, parents, and students; Robbins et al. 2012). Systems theory understands the interactions between individuals, organizations, and communities. It will allow school social workers

to enhance their understanding of the contextual nature of human behaviors and assist with the development of a holistic and relational view of one's environment (Robbins et al., 2012). Using this theory will allow me to understand social workers' engagement in defining the helping situation and enhancing teachers' and parents' self-efficacy by complying with their school division's protocol.

Values and Ethics

Values and ethics for social work address the well-being of those in society through the use of empowerment (NASW, 2017). As a social worker, the use of a person-centered approach helps with showing respect and contributes to the fundamental principles that are encouraged when working with various populations. Social workers are expected to be culturally competent when working with diverse communities and to treat each individual with dignity and worth. Pride and quality are core values that are essential in this area of practice (NASW, 2017). It is critical to provide clients with the opportunity to work to change and address their needs. (NASW, 2017).

An additional social work value that is evident in this area of practice is the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2017). Because they are the connection between school, home, and community, it is necessary for school social workers to provide leadership when working as a consultant to facilitate and ensure the use of effective interventions and collaboration. School social workers are engaged in advocacy to uphold professional expectations under the standards of the NASW and the federal and state departments of education. The third social work value evident is integrity (NASW, 2017). School social workers build connections with outside agencies to help assist

students and their families. Engaging in ethical practices is necessary to fostering trustworthiness.

NASW Code of Ethics Guidelines and Organizational Structure

Adhering to the professional responsibilities delineated under the NASW Code of Ethics relates to the NASW standards for school social work services and the value and mission of the School Social Work Association. The identified values also follow the guidelines and purpose of VDOE, which consists of the schools chosen as the research sites for this action research project. VDOE established school social work services to provide a comprehensive approach with meeting student's needs through intervention and support (VDOE, 2017). Each local education agency (LEA) can employ school social workers in a variety of ways, and therefore, many school social workers may not work to address truancy issues. School social workers' responsibilities are influenced and impacted by the LEA and impacted from the community perspective.

Understanding that each student and family treated with dignity, school social workers collaborate with other school personnel along with parents to lessen social-emotional challenges that interfere with student's ability to succeed academically. Maintaining safe learning environments and equipping children with skills to make wise choices is a priority in the school systems in Virginia (VDOE, 2017). Understanding the importance of human relationships and integrity is fundamental. School social workers in various LEA demonstrate the use of integrity through the establishment of rapport building and trust when working with students. Having the skills and ability to build a working relationship strengthens the connection.

Adhering to the LEA division organizational policies under the direction of VDOE regulations, school social workers are to follow the policies and procedures in place to make ethical decisions. The NASW Code of Ethics serves as a guide to ensure professional practice. Having additional support under the NASW standards for school social work service, school social workers understand the importance of utilizing both as a guide for help in a specialized practice.

Project Support of NASW Values and Principles

Using the NASW Code of Ethics is necessary as ethical dilemmas often happen during practice. I work to ensure that I demonstrated ethical behaviors as I make it my goal to motivate students to identify their strengths to work through their situations. Often many may point out the negative of what students are doing versus providing praise for their positivity and strengths. I am willing to challenge those who do not support students and to allow their voices to not only be heard but to be shared. Advocating is essential when working to address truancy and when developing truancy interventions that demonstrate respect and worth of a person. As a school social worker who upholds the responsibilities of being culturally competent and the use of integrity, students in primary school and their families must understand that working with professionals where personal information is shared focuses on their needs and best interest through the use of confidentiality (NASW, 2017).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section examines the historical context on the defining of truancy and its relationship to the first compulsory attendance law. Previous researchers have examined

truancy issues among primary school students (Gottfried, 2017). Truancy combined under the ruling of the early compulsory attendance laws, which was first enacted by Massachusetts in the year of 1852 (Rauscher, 2016). Mandatory early attendance law fined parents who refused to send their children to school, and during this time, other states enacted compulsory attendance laws. Enactment of the compulsory attendance laws then placed responsibility on each state.

I also examine the literature to adequately understand the identified problem while collecting pertinent information in regards to school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy programming. This section defines truancy risk factors, current social work practice for truancy in Virginia, reasons for nonattendance, and filing court petitions with the juvenile court. Finally, the literature review will define relevant terminology used to address truancy. It will summarize strengths and weaknesses related to current and past literature pertinent to the identified social work problem.

My reasoning for conducting this action research project is to identify and study school social workers' perceptions of effective truancy interventions that work to reduce the truancy amount of primary school students. Primary school is where a student receives elementary education, typically in Grades K-3. According to the Code of Virginia §22.1-199 (VDOE, 2017), kindergarten programs are suitable for children who have reached their 5th birthday by September 30th. Students are then eligible to enroll in school, and the purpose and objectives of the compulsory attendance law begin to apply. The Virginia state law also requires the parent or guardian to provide specific documentation such as the birth certificate, proof of residency, school entrance health

forms, and immunization records during the time of enrollment. Students who are classified as homeless or in foster care shall be enrolled in school immediately (VDOE, 2017). Gottfried, (2017), considered truancy to be one of the leading challenges experienced in the United States public schools.

Throughout the United States and in the state of Virginia, many school divisions report unexcused absences daily, with some reporting increasing rates of truancy (Gottfried, 2017). For this study, truancy, as defined in Virginia, is based upon habitual engagement of unexcused absences when there is no indicated parental awareness (VDOE, 2017). Excused absences should not be confused with the definition of truancy. For example, excused absences under the reasoning of personal illness, illness within the immediate family, death in the family, religious holidays, medical and court appearances are valid reasons to miss school (VDOE, 2017). By addressing attendance during primary schooling decreases truancy rates from increasing before students transfer to middle and high school. Truancy becomes a problematic social issue that leads to a decrease in student achievement, an increase of substance abuse, delinquency, and signals the onset of negative relationships with same-aged peers. In some instances, the tendencies associated with truancy not only affect students but affect parents and impact the school and community.

The Importance of School Attendance and Truancy Consequences

In the field of education, truancy continues to increase as a problem. Despite the history of concern with truancy, chronic absenteeism is described by the Commonwealth of Virginia as any student who has missed more than 10% of the current school year

(VDOE, 2017). Per the Virginia Code §22.1-98, the standard school year length for all Virginia school divisions shall require 180 schooling days (Virginia General Assembly, 2016). When students miss more than 10% of the current school year, this equals approximately 2 days per month and is equivalent to 18 days lost during the current school year (VDOE, 2017). Attendance is measured relative to the number of days the student is enrolled, as some students do not register for the standard 180 days. If students in Grades K-3 miss the identified amount of time out of school, whether absences are excused or unexcused, this places them at risk of being classified under the category of chronic absenteeism and increases their risk of being a chronic truant.

Most Virginia school divisions have an attendance procedure that requires parents or guardians to submit valid documentation supporting the student's absences upon returning to school. I have identified at my local school division that many parents fail to comply with the attendance procedure. As parents fail to provide documentation, the school division proposes the absences as unexcused without justification. Students chronically missing school have lower levels of achievement in the subject areas of math, reading, and general knowledge and require support from their parents and schools for ideal academic development (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). According to the Virginia Board of Education, school accreditation standards emphasize closing achievement gaps while providing a comprehensive outlook on improving school quality (VDOE, 2019).

One of the school quality indicators for accreditation is attendance. The marked increase in truancy rates reflects upon how school divisions monitor and report presence.

According to a previous Virginia study analysis on chronic absenteeism in three challenged school divisions, data identified one out of every 10 students were chronically absent during the 2014-2015 school year (Miller & Johnson, 2016). The research also measured areas of Central Virginia that identified higher rates (Miller & Johnson, 2016). The data gathered from the analysis of Miller and Johnson on chronic absenteeism in Virginia supports the goal of my research by recognizing school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of currently undertaken interventions to help reduce truancy.

Over and under-reporting attendance becomes a conflict based upon the variation of how truancy is defined. My research uses the current state definition of truancy. Truancy in Virginia is a status offense as a noncriminal act that is considered a violation of the law based upon the offender being a minor (Virginia General Assembly, 2016). According to the Office of Juvenile and Delinquency (OJJD), paying particular attention to factors of truancy relates to the significance of adult criminality, the use of drugs, and suicidal ideation. The Virginia Administrative Code 8VAC20-730-20, mandate school divisions to develop an intervention procedure to ensure effective interventions are applied when students engage in a pattern of nonattendance (Virginia General Assembly, 2016). Table 1 outlines the early intervention process for unauthorized absences. The responsibilities of school social workers and other stakeholders are indicated.

Table 1*Early Intervention Process*

Feature	Description
Early intervention process	When students fail to attend school on regularly scheduled school days and no information was received by school personnel indicating that the student's parent supports the absence, school personnel will notify the parent to obtain an explanation. Early intervention with the student and parent will take place for repeated unexcused absences in which the parent fails to provide an appropriate reason.
School social work/Designee intervention	The school social worker or designee will jointly develop a plan with the parent and student to resolve nonattendance once a student has reached their fifth unexcused absence. When the student and parent fail to comply with the plan developed, a referral to a multi-disciplinary team such as the Family Assessment Planning Team for assistance with implementing the attendance plan and case management will occur. Upon the sixth unexcused absence, a school conference must be held with the student and parent within 10 school days from the date of the sixth unexcused absence. The meeting shall include the parent, student, and school personnel and may consist of community supports. The attendance conference is taken 15 school days from the date of the sixth unexcused absence.
Court compliant	Upon the seventh unexcused absence, the school social worker will contact the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court intake worker and will file a child in need of supervision petition. The intake worker will receive copies of school efforts to remedy the nonattendance problem, which includes the conference meeting notes, attendance plan, and supports.
Court petition	After the complaint becomes a petition, individuals involved will receive a subpoena to appear in court.

Note. I created this table using information in the Virginia Administrative Code (Unexcused Absences Intervention Process and Responsibilities, 2016 & rev. 2021).

Acknowledging and supporting the need for early intervention identification for students in primary school will help truant youth to avoid involvement with the juvenile system and noncriminal act. Therefore, the case of an elementary-age child, the warrant files against their parent or guardian. If parents fail to collaborate with the school in efforts to remedy truancy issues during elementary, this increases the risk of continued attendance concerns during the transition to middle and high school. According to the Virginia Code §16.1-278.7, only a juvenile who is adjudicated as a delinquent and is the age of 11 and older may be committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice (Virginia General Assembly, 2016).

The adjudication hearing is the process of resolving the dispute in which the juvenile court will hold a hearing to determine the current disposition. Court dispositions order students to attend school as regularly scheduled with no unexcused absences. It also orders a student and parent to participate in counseling programs, places students on supervision or probation, suspension of student's driver's license, placing the child in a detention facility for a specified number of days and removing the child from their current home environment and placing the child with social services. Becoming involved with the juvenile court system because of noncriminal behaviors such as truancy can have a lasting impact on children's psychological state. It can lead to one becoming traumatized. Therefore, it is essential to collaborate with parents in discussing if there is a classification of mental disorders with associated criteria related to elementary-aged students' struggles with attending school.

School Social Worker Role in Truancy

After a student has accumulated five unexcused absences, school social workers are provided with an attendance referral and intervene by reaching out to the parent or guardian to obtain an explanation of the nonattendance. Outreach to the parent or guardian can be provided through telephone calls, mailing letters, and completing home visits. The awareness provided will interpret the Virginia compulsory attendance law and will review the school division's attendance procedure to discuss further action if the student fails to attend school accordingly. School social workers are to document all outreach provided. If awareness is unsuccessful, school social workers must mail home a certified U. S. mail with return receipt, which requests evidence supporting communication. School social workers are advocates for barriers that affect a student's academic success and determine the best interest of a student during conferences with school personnel and parents to provide services and resources that will help remedy the student attendance issues. Support provided by school social workers can include referring families to agencies outside of the school setting as non-academic issues may play a role in impeding the student's ability to attend school regularly.

The role of school social workers discussed above are similar practices that other school divisions in Virginia use to address truancy. Some school divisions may have truancy or attendance officers addressing truancy in collaboration with the school social worker. Both roles may intervene at different times, and through various protocols, the general practice continues to focus on decreasing truancy by providing outreach to parents. In the school setting, social workers provide strategies to teachers, which include

but are not limited to monitoring the student's attendance daily and communicating with parents.

Overall, school social workers collaborate with the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court as a last result if parents and students fail to improve and comply with the strategies discussed. School social workers following the court compliant process, there is a possible concern that many school districts in Virginia may not have supportive initiatives or interventions to address the issue of truancy. This information was shared to provide the reader with insight into school social workers' role in addressing truancy.

Literature Review Focus

Examining the literature review as the researcher is essential as it allows me to place recent research into context. Understanding the contributions in research justifies the purpose of my study. This literature review analyzed previous research on the defining of truancy to increase cognitive learning and to understand the role of school social workers when working to address truancy

Reviewing the dimensions of chronic absenteeism shares the importance of understanding the reasoning behind the nonattendance. Mallet (2016) noted that there are common reasons for absences, which include rare illness and health conditions. For example, students in elementary who suffer from a temperature above 100 degrees or higher are to remain at home until fever-free for twenty-four hours. Other health conditions, such as asthma, hunger, bullying, and depression, are possible barriers. Students also are absent when there for scheduled medical appointments, court summons, and religious holidays or activities (VDOE, 2017).

This research raises school social workers concerns in addressing the impact of chronic truancy, synthesize available truancy interventions on the scope of the issue, and share insight on how parents, schools, and the community can help address how truancy affects a student's progress with education. Parents hold the responsibility for getting their children to school each day. Schools and the community are encouraged to recognize and work together to address various barriers that inhibit students from missing school. As truancy numbers increase, the quality effect of education and healthy functioning within the student's home and community becomes a systemic problem. Chronic truancy matters as regular school attendance is vital as students work to improve their academic performance. Continued unexcused absences can affect students in Grades K-3 as being retained.

Further research proposed unexcused absences falling into three categories including, failing to submit documentation explaining the reason for the absence, providing documentation that does not relate to a valid reason, and failure to attend class while being present on school property (Reyes, 2020). The primary issue of chronic truancy develops when parents do not provide documentation; however, it also focuses on the excuse offered when it is not a justifiable reason (Reyes, 2020). This research looks at the relationship between both excused and unexcused absences, and students' progress with school achievement is studied. The findings from this study focus on the impact of missing no more than 5 days from school and the effect it has on student learning.

In addition to the RQs, this study will also take into consideration how excused absences affect a student's academic achievement. Studying other factors correlated with truancy will provide this research with understanding how truancy interventions can improve student achievement. According to Mallet (2016), students with increased numbers of unexcused absences recognized to have low motivation levels and are at higher risk of becoming disengaged from school. When students in kindergarten are frequently truant from school, their learning opportunities are placed at risk for academic failure if the attendance issue does not become addressed before transitioning to the next grade level.

Attendance is recognized to be one critical component towards measuring student's academic achievement (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). Corrective action is put into place instantly when addressing chronic truancy. The elimination process on decreasing truant behaviors should focus on possible causes when collaborating with parents and students. According to the National Center for School Engagement (2021), programs used to reduce absences fall into three main categories, which include: school division programs, court programs, and community programs. School engagement is a centerpiece to improving decisions and outcomes, focusing on integrating the three A's of school engagement, attendance, attachment, and achievement. Efforts to address chronic truancy in Central Virginia school divisions, this study will review a range of applications developed and strategies.

Programs for Building School Connectedness

Seattle Social Development Project

Seattle Social Development Project aims towards addressing the components of teacher training, social-emotional development, and parent training. This program focuses on addressing positive and problem behavior designed to provide appropriate intervention to help reduce school failure, early development of conduct problems, and school dropout (VDOE, 2005). The goal of the Seattle Social Development Project is to provide students with early intervention and support to help develop a healthy rapport throughout secondary school and adulthood.

Caring School Community

Caring School Community is a project that helps elementary schools foster a relationship in the areas of caring about the community and understanding student's social and intellectual development (VDOE, 2005). This program focuses on supporting the student's academic and practical skills in increasing functioning skills within society. Caring School Community promotes and foster parent involvement by (a) having classroom meetings that build supportive rapport, (b) buddies program, (c) community and school building, and (d) home-based parenting involvement to help connect with student's home and school experiences.

Social and Emotional Learning Program

Social and Emotional Learning Program grounded in theory and research that focuses on child development and implementing approached that will help understand student's attitudes (VDOE, 2005). This program features two core objectives, (a) creating

safe environments for schools and classrooms and (b) teaching social and emotional competencies. Other effective social and emotional learning programs include PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) and Check and Connect. PATHS provides a comprehensive prevention program for primary grade levels and designed to address academic abilities (VDOE, 2005). Check and Connect is an invention program for primary and secondary grade levels. This program actively engages at-risk educational failure, reducing attendance concerns, and provides mentoring (VDOE, 2005). Key features of Check and Connect include (a) relationship building, (b) routine monitoring, (c) timely intervention, (d) long term goals, (e) persistence, (d) problem-solving, and (f) affiliation with school and learning.

Truancy and Youth Populations

Truancy is a growing concern as a social and public health issue across today's society. Nationally representative samples in the United States have found truancy rates to be at 11%, which converts at least 2 million being absent from school at least once a month (Maynard et al., 2012). In 2017, Maynard et al., examined truancy rates between 2002 and 2014 across racial and ethnic groups. The research reported truancy rates remained constant between 2002, indicating as 10.8% and was reported as 11.1% in 2014. According to Dembo et al. (2016), there is a difference between truant and school refusal as school refusal is a psychological term based upon emotional distress or mental health challenges. They suggest that truancy appears to be a risk factor that coexists with anxiety disorders, behavior disorder, and conduct disorders (Dembo et al. 2016).

Risk and Protective Factors

Research has exposed that school truancy is a multifaceted issue that has a variety of risk factors (Maynard et al., 2017). Risk and protective factors related to truancy identified in the literature as school factors, personal factors, developmental factors, family and parental factors, and neighborhood and community factors (Maynard et al., 2017). Identified risk factors can hinder a student from receiving quality education as public school is a privilege. Based on this research on the risk factors explaining why students may purposely miss school, further research may determine legitimate reasons for nonattendance.

Further literature divided nonattendance into three categories. First, students who are incapable of attending based upon sickness, responsibilities within the family, instability of housing. Next, students who struggle to attend who seek to avoid bullying, living in conditions that are unsafe, harassment. Lastly, students who refuse to participate based upon parents' lack of encouragement, lack of understanding of school value, and having other personal interests. Understanding various factors that contribute to one's attendance examines many causes and consequences. A variety of factors included student, school, family, and community factors correlates as broad categories of truancy (Maynard et al., 2017). The literature categorized risk and protective factors in a contextual way.

Student Factors

Student factors focus on their beliefs, behaviors, and values. Understanding student attributes also contributes to their days of missed school. Student factors that

possibly may increase truant behaviors include mental disorders such as disruptive disorders, anxiety, substance abuse, and mood disorders. Havik et al. (2015) identified difficulties in social situations as a leading contributing factor behind poor attendance and suggested truancy having a connection with family mental disorders or chronic health. The shared school factors indicate the cycle of academic disengagement and poor academic achievement.

School Factors

Perceptions of the overall school climate, such as structure and support, have a powerful influence on students' level of rapport. Research determined that a lack of classroom management further increases school refusal, whereas further research identifies how effective classroom strategies stimulate reassuring relationships with students (Havik et al., 2015). New research shared how students struggle with large environmental settings, which increases feelings of isolation and challenges students to choose not to attend school while seeking to escape their feelings (Havik et al., 2015). A school's climate can make a student feel uncomfortable, unwanted, unvalued, and unaccepted. When students have a lack of building trust with school staff, this creates a barrier towards their attitudes and perceptions towards attending school.

Family and Community Factors

Surge et al. (2016) indicated multiple contributing factors such as family mobility, poverty, parental unemployment, and lack of parents understanding school policies. Consequently, these students are at risk for challenges in the area of emotional regulation resulting in higher risk for disengagement in school (Surge et al., 2016). Living situations

such as students living in single-parent households, and parents who lack transportation and childcare are related to community and economic factors. According to Reyes (2020), nonattendance knowledge should be known by the parent, and the research identified how parents, at times, allow children to stay at home to enjoy a day off from school.

Current Research on Truancy

Concerns on truancy rates continue to increase nationwide. This section focuses on considerable current research that examines interventions and recommendations for future support on addressing attendance. Researchers, Teuscher, and Makarova (2018) identified school engagement and truancy as the two most prominent constructs associated with increasing school dropout rates. Although many children begin school in prekindergarten, the majority enter school in kindergarten. In my opinion, if students are not engaged while attending primary school, students are more likely to have a lack of interest or do not take the initiative of the resources provided to want to learn more once they have reached secondary school. The reasons behind truancy are intricate and consist of psychological, social, family, and individual-related aspects. Research on active school engagement (Teuscher and Makarova, 2018) revolves around good student-teacher relationships, a positive school climate, and a safe learning environment.

For that reason, structural characteristics of a school's atmosphere conveyed through beliefs, values, and norms are essential when forming an environment to support the decrease of truancy rates. It is important to consider students' attitudes towards coming to school as it affects their academic achievement, their relationships with same-

aged peers, teachers, and community. Truancy negatively impacts a student's academic performance. Teachers can be very beneficial to attendance rates due to the relationships they build with their students. A teacher should want their students to feel safe, cared for, and respected within the learning environment. Teachers must learn to adapt and accommodate the different methods students use to learn to ensure the lessons are appealing and leave the students craving more. Moreover, students must remain the focus of learning, which means student input should be valued when considering writing lesson plans. All in all, a more engaged student will promote a more eager student, which in turn will improve school attendance and vice versa.

Rhodes et al. (2018) studied the mechanisms and specific services within interventions that are commonly effective with primary age school children. Truancy has shown to have enduring links with adverse consequences on the mental, physical, and social health of individuals. There are possible chances, students who are truant experience environmental factors associated with increased risk of committing various forms of crimes throughout the life-course. Research also suggests truancy negatively impacting children's academic future based upon an asymptomatic host of concerns that often escalate to severe problems (Rhodes et al., 2018). In spite of difficulties that determine fundamental relations amongst students, parents, and school connected characteristics, and I believe truancy is a resilient predictor of critical consequences in various areas.

Thus, the complexity of the phenomenon, many possible causes of truancy, increases grade retention rates (Rhodes et al., 2018). My thoughts towards studying

factors associated with truancy can lead to identifying critical interventions and provide a way to examine a student's school experience concerning increased days of missing school. For example, chronic absenteeism views as an early warning indicator where effective intervention should take place to remedy the reasons for nonattendance.

Summary

The information gathered in this project is derived from school social workers' perceptions regarding the use of truancy interventions. Previously, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that was signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, provided grants to help improve the quality for elementary and secondary education (U. S. Department of Education, 2017). Soon the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was established in 2002 by President George W. Bush, which commanded states and school districts to discover alternative ways to support academic success (U. S. Department of Education, 2003). The information gathered in this research reflects upon the new education law known as the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA), which was passed on December 10, 2015, and advances equity and helps support and grow local innovations (U. S. Department of Education, 2017). Through collaboration and data, I yearned to expand the indulgence of others who provide professional school social work services. My vigorous attempts are to create transformations in the lives of students, families, teachers, schools, social workers, and humanity.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The goal of this qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy interventions to help address barriers amongst primary school students. In this section, I explain the research design that I used to answer the RQs. This section will also include information on the setting, participant demographics, data collection, themes, and evidence of trustworthiness. A summary is provided at the end of the section.

Background and Context

I wanted to explore participants' perceptions of the prevalence of truancy in Virginia and the effectiveness of established school process or procedures for addressing truancy. Action research projects facilitate authentic change while preparing the researcher to become an independent scholar (Vaughan et al., 2019). In the profession of school social work, it is vital to examine ways to develop effective solutions (NASW, 2017). As a school social worker, I wanted to better understand the daily practice of professionals in the field while working with individuals receiving services. This action research study may influence the use of evidence-based practices and provide knowledge that supports personal growth and professional development in the field of school social work. I hope that the data collected for this project will advance school social workers' strategies while working with students in various populations.

Research Design

I conducted this qualitative research study to further knowledge on students in Grades K-3 who are experiencing chronic truancy. To explore the impact of truancy, I asked Virginia school social workers to share their perceptions related to addressing truancy in grades. This information may support school social workers in the future. I also asked them to share their experiences, challenges, feelings, ideas, and suggestions for improving daily school attendance. Each participant was transparent when discussing issues, they had experienced while impacting the lives of students and families in the academic setting. Additionally, they shared best practices; this knowledge may enable effective services and resources for truancy in Grades K-3 and contribute to evidence-based research. The RQs for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are school social workers' perceptions of current contemporary truancy interventions, such as developing a conference attendance plan?

RQ2: Which truancy interventions do school social workers find are most useful for primary school students in Grades K-3?

I interviewed social workers in Virginia to answer the RQs. The participants engaged in in-depth individual interviews and focus group interviews. Each participant shared problems that they had encountered when implementing interventions. This supported the purpose of this action research study.

I found a collaborative approach to be helpful with the logistics and facilitation of focus groups. To answer the RQs, I used the qualitative method. The qualitative approach embraces seeking an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The use of the qualitative method provided participants with the opportunity to express their feelings and experiences. The study findings may extend the knowledge base of the social work profession while influencing school social work practice in school settings. As the researcher of this study, I sought to guide and advocate for the need for parent collaboration and communication to help decrease truancy among primary school students. The qualitative aspect of the study was the use of focus groups to understand each participant's perceptions regarding effective truancy intervention for primary school students.

Methodology

Prospective Data

Gathering data assists the facilitator and the research participants to extend understanding while defining the problem or issue (Stringer, 2014). I sought to understand each participant's perceptions or experiences. Interviews are the primary data tool for action research projects (Stringer, 2014). I developed an interview topic guide as a tool to use when asking interview questions. Specific questions asked focused on participants' knowledge of the Virginia compulsory attendance law, completion of attendance plans, professional development and training with teachers and staff, creation of a supportive school environment, development of positive relationships, implementation of incentive programs, community collaboration, and filing of truancy petitions with the juvenile courts. Rubin and Rubin (2016) identified how the researcher facilitates the conversation movement while allowing others to express their point of view during the focus group. According to Stringer (2014), a focus group basic

framework includes the following: (a) ground rules, (b) explanation of procedures, (c) a summary of perceptions, (d) recording of the outcome, and (e) a review of progress for next plan of action.

Using the interview topic guide, I asked semistructured interview questions during the focus group discussions. As Stringer (2014) observed, the use of semistructured interview questions can promote rigor while identifying specific evidence about the participant's assets. I developed the semistructured interview generated based on the literature review and the themes related to the research topics. Open-ended questions focused on the participant's awareness and expertise in addressing chronic attendance. The structured interview questions, asked during the individual interview and focus groups, concentrated on the school social worker's experience with delivering the intervention to address truancy and the barriers encountered when executing strategies. The questions also provided insight on effective and ineffective interventions when working with students and parents.

Key Concepts

I engaged in a systematic process to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions to generate new ideas. The system theory undergirded this study because it allows school social workers to examine family issues, community norms, and dysfunction to personal challenges that may impact children from attending school (Robbins et al., 2012). The system theory approach also identifies school social workers' ability to recognize anxiety, depression, difficulties with self-esteem, or concerns with interpersonal relationships. System theory seeks to holistically examine how behavior is influenced by various

factors, working together as one system (Robbins et al., 2012). Considering human behavior may help school social workers to assist students because many complex interconnected factors are associated with truancy and impact development and educational progression.

The empowerment theory was also relevant to this study because it describes how school social workers promote resilience in family and community partnerships. Empowerment theory focuses on promoting the development of self and awareness (Robbins et al., 2012). For example, this theory promotes the importance of using interventions to support others in gaining a sense of control, especially families struggling with unpredictable barriers that may impact daily school attendance. The individual interviews and focus groups both align well with the focus of this study as they share a platform for different opinions and interpretations about a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The following concepts are central to the project:

Early intervention process: A process that is initiated when a student fails to report to school on a regularly scheduled school day and school personnel have received no information.

Extensive unexcused absences: A situation that occurs when a student has accrued seven unexcused absences and an attendance conference is held in conjunction with a representative from the multidisciplinary team (e.g., FAPT member, court services, department of social services, or community services board).

Filing a petition: The filing of a complaint with the juvenile and domestic relations court alleging that a child is in need of supervision. This occurs when the parent

or guardian is intentionally noncompliant with compulsory attendance requirements as discussed during the development of the attendance plan and conference.

Primary academic level: Youth ages 5-8 in Grades K-3.

Recurring unexcused absences: A situation that occurs when a student has five absences and an attendance plan is developed to resolve nonattendance issues.

Recruitment Strategies

Recruitment strategies were vital to the success and goal of this action research project. I created an electronic recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) to convey the purpose and qualifications for joining the research. I recruited Virginia school social workers with the support of VASSW. The VASSW research committee requested a completed application. After receiving approval from the VASSW research committee, the president of the VASSW forwarded the invitation to all personnel in the organization. The invitation instructed potential research participants to contact me by email or phone to volunteer. The interview guide included the demographic, interview, and group semistructured interview questions.

Instrumentation

I did not utilize established instruments; instead, I developed the questions that I asked during individual interviews and focus groups (see Appendix B). During the individual interviews, open-ended questions were asked concerning the participant's experience with addressing truancy. The goal of the focus group was to provide participants with the opportunity to respond to prearranged semistructured interview questions about their perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy programming. Allowing

each participant to share their opinions and experiences helped increase the data for this action research project.

Data Analysis

Before beginning the data collection, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), data collection includes in-depth phenomenological conversations. A developed plan supported the frequency of data collected during the focus group. The data analysis begins after completing data is received from the focus group. Transcribing the data from audio recordings during the focus group was the next phase to complete. After finalizing the transcription process, the participants reviewed the data report to clarify the accuracy of the information received. It was essential to discuss the participant's feedback during the focus groups to analyze the school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of using truancy programming for students in Grades K-3. The nature of the qualitative method is to understand the problem based upon shared experiences from professionals who work to address and advocate for the same issue (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Coding the data were divided into categories based upon evidence related to chronic truancy and the challenges associated with various factors. As the researcher, my goal for coding the data is to provide a detailed description to support the qualitative study as described in section three.

Population and Sample Size

The total number of participants recommended for this project was 12-15 school social workers located in various regions of Virginia. It was essential to remember that

everyone will not want to participate in the research study when identifying the sample size. The criteria participants were required to have included:

- master's degree in social work
- licensure or endorsement as a school social worker in Virginia with 2-3 years of experience
- current employment in a public school division in Virginia that serves students in Grades K-3
- identified work with students in the form of providing interventions, support, and resources to address attendance and truancy.

Overall, 15 school social workers initially agreed to volunteer; however, three school social workers did not join due to personal life situations. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), there is no specific number of participants required to join when conducting a qualitative research study. Gathering feedback and understanding each participant's perspective was the reasoning for the sample size. Table 2 provides an overview of the participant demographics.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant no.	Age	Highest degree	Years of experience	Additional grade levels
P2	32	MSW	2	Yes, K-12
P3	25	MSW	2	Yes, K-12
P6	29	MSW	5	Yes, K-5
P9	27	MSW	5	Yes, pre-K-5
P11	30	MSW	3	Yes, K-5
P14	28	MSW	4	Yes, K-12
P15	27	MSW	3	Yes, K-12
P16	26	MSW	3	Yes, K-5

P17	29	MSW	2	Yes, K-8
P18	31	MSW	5	Yes, K-12
P19	33	MSW	4	Yes, K-12
P20	30	MSW	3	Yes, K-5

Note. MSW = Master of Social Work degree; K-12 = kindergarten through Grade 12; K-5 = kindergarten through Grade 5; pre-K-5 = prekindergarten through Grade 5; K-8 = kindergarten through Grade 8.

Participant Demographics

Each participant was from different school districts in Virginia and provided their lived experiences and perspectives about their role as school social workers addressing truancy and attendance with Grades K-3. All participants had obtained a Master of Social Worker (MSW) degree and had at least 2 years of experience working inclusively in the elementary setting. Some of the participants also have had experience working with additional grade levels. Per each participant, each have faced challenges when providing interventions and resources to students and families struggling to attend school daily. Participants provided insight on what could improve to ensure best practices and support to increase school, community, and parental involvement.

Ethical Procedures

Due to the unprecedented events related to the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns with safety protocols, all interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform. At the time of the data collection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) precautions and best practices recommended social distancing (6 feet apart from others) and wearing a mask. The Zoom platform allowed the conduction of interviews to be held virtually and online and was sufficient and beneficial for each participant. Each interview and focus

group were scheduled and conducted according to the information as described in the approved IRB documents by Walden University on October 15, 2021.

The IRB approval number for this study is 10-15-21-0569879. As I received IRB approval, I took the necessary steps to ensure protection of participants. There was a total of 12 school social workers who participated in the study representing the different school regions of Virginia. Although each participant is employed in Virginia's public school setting, no information intrudes upon their privacy as participants. Participants volunteering to participate received the consent form provided via email. The consent form also indicated that each participant providing consent could, at any time during the study, withdraw.

Each participant provided informed consent, which shared information on rights as a participant. After receiving consent, I provided each participant with a calendar providing dates and times for availability to arrange an individual interview. During the research study, each participant received a code by the letter P and an individual number (e.g., Participant 1 or P1). As the researcher, I explained the importance of confidentiality and protection against harm. Data was collected through the Zoom virtual platform, in which participants were encouraged to be in a setting free from distractions. All participants were emailed a password-protected link to join the Zoom to ensure privacy during data collection. Only participants with the password were allowed to enter the Zoom. As the researcher, I disabled the screen sharing capability so participants would not be able to share their screens during the study. Private chats were also disabled, allowing the participants to chat only with the entire group if needed.

Role of the Researcher

As the facilitator, I acknowledge having a working relationship with school social workers in Virginia. The participants for this study are not identified as coworkers as we each work for different school divisions. Each participant is trained to use a wide range of evidence-based skills to enhance student learning. As the facilitator, my goal was to provide an environment fostered around growth and not as an expert. It is essential to take on the part of a catalyst to assist stakeholders in developing their analysis of their perceptions (Stringer, 2014). As the facilitator, I illustrated the usefulness of my thoughts and feelings and was an indispensable element of specialized development. Action research is rooted in formulating solutions through positive relationships (Stringer, 2014). Serving as the facilitator, my responsibility was to support these activities by developing an empathetic understanding of the prospective participants.

Summary

This section focuses on the identified methods used to help conduct the development and research for this study. Each section described the appropriateness that helped elicit information on school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy programming. Data collection for this project consisted of 12 licensed school social workers in Virginia. Data collection procedures supported the aim of this study. Due to truancy being a complex issue, the research methods support the problem statement by identifying effective and efficient interventions school social workers can offer to students to ensure school success and attendance. Examining the possible consequences truancy has, section three will discuss how the research methods affect

systems, including individuals, schools, families, and the community. For school social workers to provide evidenced-based support, the next session will also discuss the use of system theory and empowerment theory.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to review school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy interventions for primary school students in Grades K-3. To further examine how truancy impacts one's educational success, I conducted individual interviews and two focus groups using semistructured interview questions. The participants were school social workers in Virginia.

Data Analysis Techniques

Time Frame for Data Collection

I received IRB approval on October 15, 2021 (approval no. 10-15-21-0569879) and proceeded with the recruitment process in December 2021. School social workers who were interested in the study sent me an email stating "I consent." After receiving this confirmation, I moved forward with scheduling the individual interviews via Zoom. The individual interviews were held from December 2021 to the beginning of January 2022, and each lasted approximately 30 minutes. The four demographic questions were presented first during the individual interview; next, the five interview questions were discussed. After all individual interviews were completed, I shared two dates for participants to attend the focus group. I conducted each focus group via Zoom during January and March 2022. I categorized the participants by assigning an identifying letter and number to code each participant. Participants each completed a 10-question survey provided by Qualtrics software. I took field notes during each interview and focus group to ensure that I accurately recorded responses.

One advantage of using Zoom was that it enabled the secure recording of interviews and allowed me, as the researcher and facilitator, to enable and disable options during the meeting to secure and minimize disruptions. Another advantage is that Zoom provided a complete written transcription that I was able to print out and read multiple times. As I reviewed the transcripts, I highlighted essential phrases to support the feedback provided. I then highlighted additional notes that were common experiences as shared by each participant. Next, I reviewed the notes that I took during the focus groups. Participants also had access to their interview transcripts and were provided the opportunity to verify or amend the information. All data collected were stored on my personal computer and are password protected. Data was then transferred to a password-protected USB drive and placed in a locked file for security purposes. After completing this study, the data collected will be destroyed within 5 years.

Tracking and Organization Procedures

There were two focus groups, both held virtually on separate dates. Each group focused on the school social worker's perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy interventions for primary school students. Each participant provided permission to be audio recorded. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each focus group session commenced with an introduction and review of guidelines and ground rules. Next, I shared the two RQs and moved forward with asking the group semistructured interview questions. Each participant was engaged and provided feedback. As the sessions continued, I inquired for clarification as needed. For example, if a statement was made about which I was uncertain, I further probed for the participant to explain their idea to

ensure that I understood what was being conveyed. Before ending the sessions, I shared a description of how the data would be analyzed. I concluded the focus groups by sharing my appreciation and gratitude to each participant for their involvement and engagement in the study. I reminded participants that transcriptions would be provided so that they could clarify the accuracy of the information received. Last, I reviewed my contact information with the participants, encouraging each to feel free to ask questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

Throughout this research-action project, I focused on identifying concepts and outcomes pertinent to the study phenomenon. In this section, I describe how I coded the data in conjunction with identified themes. I first coded and analyzed the data collected from one-on-one demographic interviews. Each participant's responses were transcribed before being analyzed to determine themes and similarities. The first step consisted of identifying emergent keywords frequently used by the participants. The next step included hand-coding to justify the codes that emerged from keywords, specifically from participants, and to develop corresponding themes. Four themes were identified after completing Steps 1 and 2, representing the school social worker's perceptions.

I transcribed each participant's responses via Zoom and provided the transcription to participants to review. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), member checking ensures data accuracy. There was no additional information to consider per participant, and I received approval of the information shared. I rigorously reviewed the data to identify codes, concepts, and themes. As the researcher, I developed a description

representing the perceptions of school social workers' experiences on the effectiveness of truancy interventions for students in Grades K-3.

Working diligently to confirm that the transcriptions were correct and that there was no missing information, I reviewed the data at least twice on different occasions. The data analysis procedures for this action research project included hand-coding, in-vivo coding, and descriptive coding. I also used colored index cards to help determine codes from each focus group. According to Saldana (2016), data often consist of interview transcripts, field notes from observing participants, journals, videos, or photographs. Using hand-coding, I wanted to certify the reliability of the data. Therefore, the data were manually coded into a Microsoft Excel document and color-coded, including the group semistructured focus group questions in the first section. In the next section, I listed each participant's number. Due to hand-coding, the process took approximately 3 weeks, beginning in April 2022 and concluding in May 2022. Moving forward, I utilized in-vivo coding, which allowed me to identify the actual language recognized by the participants during the focus group interactions.

Saldana (2016) encouraged researchers to understand the meaning of words or phrases identified through in-vivo coding and to conduct member checking to ensure understanding of the context provided by participants. I used in-vivo coding during the initial cycle of coding, documenting phrases and keywords shared by the participants. This process was repeated by working to see if there were additional phrases that were not documented. Last, I used descriptive coding to choose similarities to support the creation of themes and subthemes. According to Saldana, descriptive coding allows a

researcher to select a code constructed from the topic of the data. I spent 8 days on in-vivo coding and 9 days on descriptive coding. There were a total of 134 codes from in-vivo coding and a total of 68 codes from descriptive coding. After combining in-vivo and descriptive coding, I identified patterns to divide into classifications. There were a total of 22 codes divided into classifications under the four essential themes and subthemes. The cycles of coding supported the identification of outcomes and themes.

Validation Procedures

I analyzed the data by taking the descriptive information and providing an explanation or interpretation. According to Stringer (2014), using the verbatim principle when conducting focus groups will help the researcher to precisely record information. The participants' responses were transcribed through the Zoom digital platform and transcription and maintained on a password computer based upon standards of Walden University. The transcription was an essential part of the data collection. I analyzed the data and focused on studying the transcript, assessing different categories of the data, and determining continuing patterns. I used a reflective record journal to execute the data collected. Stringer shared the imperativeness of recording information about the issue or problem investigated. The reflective journal was a continuous document used to demonstrate my learning progress. There were three forms of qualitative coding used to ensure the data collection was reliable. The data were coded twice as it allowed me to identify codes that were repetitive and to discover different codes that were unnoticed throughout the first process of coding.

I believe that the audio recording and the transcriptions of the data increased the trustworthiness of the data to ensure consistency. Furthermore, the use of , in relation to the use of individual interviews supported the validation of this action research study as two focus groups were held during data collection. Triangulation permitted diverse data foundations as each focus group shared responses during different sessions, which reinforced the identification of themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Both groups had similar responses, supporting the reliability and credibility of the action research data. Limitations of trustworthiness and rigor will be described to consider the importance of trust and confidence with findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

An integral part of reliability in this action research study was to validate the work of the researcher and participant. Trustworthiness pertains to dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability in research (Stringer, 2014). I provided each participant with the same rules to ensure no discrepancies. Stringer (2014) further defined rigor as having accuracy to meet the criteria for collecting data and analysis.

Credibility

The use of credibility was valuable and consistent during each focus group. I provided probing and clarifying questions as necessary during data collection. As a result, there were no identified discrepancies. I also established confidence in the research study's findings, providing participants their transcripts to check for misinterpretations of their feedback. Checking for misconceptions happened to be one of the critical aspects of qualitative research. Data triangulation involved in-depth individual interviews and a

semistructured survey to increase the validity and reliability of results. I also triangulated by looking for outcomes and similarities within and across each participant.

Transferability

A dense description of the population studied is one-way transferability was described, which supports the themes and subthemes identified. Consequently, the number of research participants in this qualitative research included 12 school social workers. I attempted to improve the transferability of the study data by distributing related evidence to readers, allowing them to understand the implications on their own. It was helpful to share what participants expressed in context.

Dependability

I addressed dependability in this study by aiming to verify that the findings were consistent with the raw data collected. To engage participants, I shared a brief PowerPoint presentation describing the study's purpose. Next, I explained why participants were selected to volunteer for the study. In addition, I described the research design and shared a description of the data collection process. Interviews were recorded and thoroughly transcribed, allowing me to further attain dependability.

Confirmability

I established confirmability by creating field notes and evaluating the effectiveness of participants' perceptions. Throughout the focus groups, clarification was asked as needed. Reflexivity was adopted, allowing me to look at my own background bias, irrespective of the measures to prevent misconceptions. As the researcher, I sought to demonstrate a self-critical attitude, considering how my preconceptions could affect

the research. I communicated with my committee for further support if questions or concerns arose.

Findings

I used coding techniques to discover themes, based upon responses from school social worker participants. I reviewed the transcriptions to allow themes to emerge individually through coding. Table 3 illustrates the four main themes and their corresponding subthemes and codes.

Table 3

Essential Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Essential Theme	Subtheme	Code
Assessing truancy in Grades K-3	Definition of truancy Recognizing barriers	Communication of attendance expectations Consistent process for documenting attendance On-site school visits Home visits Personalized outreach
Enforcing the compulsory attendance law	Use of interventions Filing truancy petitions Educating parents, teachers, and community	Attendance plan Conferences Creation of a safe school climate Small group sessions with students Data and documentation Professional development Posters and banners
Impact of truancy	Mental health Culture	Limited access to services Parental lack of knowledge on services and resources IEP or Section 504 accommodations Individual sessions with students Purposeful relationships
Reduction of truancy	Engagement and collaboration Parental involvement Incentives	Increased involvement Positive engagement Self-assessments Development of local toolkits Participation in attendance campaigns

Note. K-3 = kindergarten through Grade 3; IEP = individual education plan.

Theme 1: Assessment of Truancy in Grades K-3

Theme 1 is related to the following question: What are your thoughts about assessing students for truancy? The consensus of participants was that each is a qualified and trained school social worker, providing direct and indirect services to support families and students' academic success. Additionally, each participant agreed that their role as a school social worker requires extensive knowledge when assessing issues such as truancy, considering themselves to be an integral part of the school community. Conversely, participants agreed everyone has a right to education, especially during the elementary stages, to learn fundamental skills; however, they find it challenging to assess truancy, considering the systematic barriers.

P9 shared: I believe there are multiple factors involved in assessing for truancy. First, teachers should be an active part of the process. If they have not attempted communication with a parent to determine the reason for absences, I am unwilling to initiate support until that step is completed. Social workers and school counselors should not be the first person to initiate contact. Second, COVID-19 has created more headaches for attendance. More and more kids are absent by quarantine guidelines. It is challenging identifying COVID-19 related cases and who is truly considered truant based on the number of days missed. Thirdly, most importantly, understanding that attendance always has a reason and is a form of communication, just like behavior. It is crucial to have a lens of "What is preventing students from attending." Often there are environmental factors that play a role, including transportation.

Other participants considered their role as being connected to various services they provide, reflecting upon the statement offered by P9. Each shared they service students in Grades K-3 regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or academic status. In addition, the participants reported their wide range of skills allows them to not only work with the students. According to P6: I think assessing students for truancy can't be completed without parent input. Parents are a significant factor with students in K-3rd, and their input should be considered while assessing students for truancy.

Further, in the discussion, participants shared the importance of school staff, including teachers, counselors, administrators, and community stakeholders should, understand the definition of truancy. Participants agreed that the defining of truancy is when a student is absent from school without parental awareness or justification. Despite each participant working as a school social worker in Virginia, participants shared that their school policies align with the compulsory attendance law. Participants agreed a significant indication of truancy is the number of unexcused absences. However, most have different procedures to identify and address truancy, such as who is involved in the early intervention process.

P18 shared that out of their 5 years of experience, the definition of truancy has not changed in the state of Virginia. P18 explained the importance of accessing the Virginia Law Administrative Code, Chapter 730: Regulations Governing the Collection and Reporting of Truancy-Related Data and Student Attendance Policies. P18 shared that understanding the definition of truancy is vital when working to understand the diverse challenges that families and students face. Their main concern was "Meeting the family

and student where they are, by understanding students in Grades K-3 are not responsible for sending themselves to school.” This led to systemic barriers as the next subtheme under theme one.

Participants identified barriers to attendance such as poverty, lack of resources to meet basic needs, chronic illness, transportation, and lack of access to medical care. Participants further discussed the causes of truancy are vastly wide-ranging and can be heightened by other contextual aspects. The majority of participants also identified the importance of having a positive and healthy school climate, such as safety, student autonomy, practical instructional approaches, and consistent regulations to increase school connectedness, based upon the consideration of barriers.

Some of the contextual factors identified were parental, school, and community factors. P20 further explored how parental factors include problematic parenting, lack of communication, and single-parent household. P20 noted family factors consisted of enmeshment, and conflict, lack of transportation. P15 followed P20 observation, sharing that community factors are broad in that some families reside in unsafe neighborhoods, have gang-related activity, and have a loss of employment. Considering the barriers and how truancy is defined, P3 shared: I believe there should be a process for addressing truancy with a set of rules and guidelines to follow instead of just handing truancy over to school attendance officers and the school social worker to address and determine how they see fit to help students and families.

Theme 2: Enforcement of the Compulsory Attendance Law

Theme 2 is related to the following questions: Who do you involve in the delivery of interventions to address truancy? When implementing strategies to decrease truancy, how do you consider the interventions help to improve educational and behavioral outcomes? The majority of participants shared that before enforcing the compulsory attendance law, it is necessary to focus on preventative measures and techniques such as reviewing a school's attendance policies, social-emotional programs, and initiatives to involve parents. Some recurring words used by participants to describe enforcing the law were education and collaboration. According to P6, the main individuals involved in the delivery of interventions to address truancy include the parent, school counselor, teacher, and administrator at the school level. If the concerns are extensive, schools refer to an interagency team to offer more interventions.

When presented with a probing question, "How are parents/guardians involved in the intervention?" P6 further shared: I agree with the parent participation. We try not to hold meetings without the parents being present, and in some cases, parents may refuse. Therefore, the school continues to put supports in place to help the student. As far as student involvement, it is tricky because they are younger. Still, in the past, school administrators and school counselors have had individual conversations with students, set small goals to help motivate students to attend school, and meet the students where they are. It's suitable for school personnel to share the importance of students reporting to school to provide the students with a different perception.

Similar to other participant responses, P2 pointed out that the parent has to be involved, especially when working with students in Grades K-3. Students in Grades K-3 often rely on parents to help prepare them for school and cannot prepare themselves as students in older grade levels can. The parent is more responsible for students in Grades K-3. Also, it's important to ask teachers to follow up as well. It should not be left alone solely for social workers to deliver interventions. Teachers often see students regularly and should have a connection with the family. As the school social worker comes to provide support, the teacher may be able to offer more insight into the family dynamics.

P2 shared experience with interventions to help to improve educational and behavioral outcomes. P2 noted that behavioral and academic concerns often arise due to truancy (students can't learn if they aren't at school, leading to behavioral problems because they are frustrated about not understanding the materials). Interventions should include factors to assist with helping the student succeed when they return to school or providing support and assistance on the days when they are not in school. Most students I've observed have behavior issues and struggle academically because they are not attending school. When they are present at school, challenges remain present with completing work, or they appear not focused. The number of days they have missed in school contributes to academic difficulties. Also, I believe attendance and behavior are connected, especially when a student becomes frustrated when having to complete make-up work.

Participants described the challenges for school social workers to be able to file court petitions, such as a CHINS or parental petition. P17 summarized this issue sharing,

court intervention, and supervision are necessary to assist the school district or parent in reducing the child's absences. Suppose the steps taken by the school district are not successful in substantially reducing a student's absences and in consideration of the student's age and grade. In that case, the petition is generally against the parent. P17 also shared one challenge is presenting court services with adequate data/documentation that includes facts supporting each required allegation. P17 expressed how school personnel often think the filing of a petition may help resolve the nonattendance; however, most times, students remain truant, and parents are not held accountable.

P18 contended that it is first important to include other key district staff during attendance plans and conferences, such as school nurses, school counselors, pupil personnel staff, or mental health and family agencies, before the filing of a petition. P18 mentioned that sometimes students are absent or parents do not send children to school with faced with an illness, do not consider the school climate safe as many younger children experience bullying, and how truancy is largely connected with low family income. P18 suggested how school-based interventions such as small group counseling can allow students to talk about what helps improves daily attendance. P18 also reported it is significant to have school-based support as, ultimately, the student remains an active student, requiring approaches to vigorously encourage participation when in attendance.

Each participant expressed their frustration with addressing truancy amid concern about COVID-19. Each participant agreed that it is vital for parents, educators, and stakeholders to understand the attendance law and receive professional development to increase engagement. P14 shared the following:

Not only am I a school social worker, but I am also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in the state of Virginia. It is relevant to recognize emotional engagement where staff can understand how students feel linked to their school environment and cognitive engagement, focusing on students' motivation, ownership, and regulation levels. Educating others should go hand-in-hand with training on safe school climate, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and following a multitier approach to reduce and seek prevention tailored to different grade levels and subgroups. Having more training would be beneficial not only to school social workers but also to the teachers, administrators, parents, and the community because more will help us to become aligned to effectively address the needs of our students and families.

Theme 3: Impact of Truancy

Theme 3 is related to the following questions: How do you feel when considering social and cultural factors when deciding on interventions to address truancy? How does mental health diagnosis influence interventions? The role of a school social worker is to provide an array of services, support, and resources, despite their continued direct and indirect outreach. To help ensure adequacy in providing services, each participant revealed that cultural competence allows social workers to navigate and guide students and families to overcome barriers. P9 explained that social, cultural, and economic factors should be the very first thing to consider when attempting to address truancy. If you don't consider those in the assessment process, you are missing the "whole child" and potentially wasting your time.

P6 followed by stating: I feel you honestly never know what a student or family is experiencing behind closed doors. It is vital to have a conversation with the parents before we even attend a meeting to allow parents to have a safe space to express their needs. Often, parents may not feel comfortable sharing their challenges in front of others. So it is essential to discuss with parents individually before attending a meeting to know how to proceed. P3 further added: I want to add some instances I try to change the narrative of the conversation when speaking with parents. For example, I will ask, “How can the schools assist your child with coming to school?” versus asking, “Why are their children not coming to school?” Changing how you ask questions can be very helpful when considering social and cultural factors.

Although resources and services are made available to students and families, all participants agreed it is important to take culture and social factors into consideration as it can provide an explanation regarding the reasons why students are truant and well as assist in providing effective interventions. When presented with the semi-structure question, “How do you feel about effective and ineffective truancy interventions?” P9 further noted that, if environmental factors are a component in the absences, an intervention plan is a crucial way to determine interventions and solutions on how to support and assist the family. Oftentimes, when the factors are expressed by a family and a solution is created, we see a quick improvement in attendance. If the absences are truancy and more of a refusal to come to school, it can be much trickier. At the elementary level, sometimes it can be as easy as incentives to come to school. But as kids get older, they sometimes need to hear/feel the consequences of truancy. Overall, I

believe the interventions are dependent and a result of the circumstances of each individual case.

P9 also stated,

One ineffective intervention that sticks out in my mind is a doctor's note. We often do an intervention plan and attendance contract. The attendance contract can require parents to submit a doctor's note for the absences to be excused. Often has experienced a lot of backlash from parents on obtaining doctor's notes; however, concerns arise if the student may be sick or exposed to COVID-19. I have recognized documentation of doctor's notes can be ineffective and often recommend parents speak with the school nurse.

P2 agreed with P9. P2 stated, "Effective interventions are most considered to be personalized to meet the student and family where they are. Using the same intervention for other families is not effective if it does not meet their presenting needs."

In addition, P2 indicated that I believe a lot of truancy interventions utilized in schools are ineffective. One of the main concerns I notice is when school professionals do not communicate with each other, and all the school officials are reaching out to families, it can be very problematic. Therefore, better communication between families and schools and school professionals with each other would be more efficient in addressing truancy.

The majority of all participants shared how a student's exposure to trauma, violence, and stress increases the risk for mental health challenges and causes excessive absences from school. Participants agreed truancy is disproportionately increasing for

low-income families, vulnerable populations, or minority groups. Despite the obstacles with physical health, such as concerns with dental and medical care, and mental health issues, students can be referred for a Section 504 Plan or Individualized Education Program (IEP).

P12 emphasized these issues as follows: I believe poor mental health is linked to nonattendance; however, who is to say it does may not relate to school refusal. For example, a student may suffer from anxiety or some type of phobia; however, anxiety may not only be linked to school refusal but can be linked to accumulating unexcused absences or truancy. Yes, students suffering from physical and mental health are often referred for a 504 or IEP, which supplies an evaluation of needs; however, many of these students also receive home-bound instruction, meaning they have a medical reason indicating the need to be confined at home.

P16 followed by discussing the contributing factors related to adverse childhood experiences (ACES), such as abuse and household/environmental changes. P16 expressed how ACES can affect learning behavior and attendance, indicating the need for schools to increase trauma-informed care. Participants furthered shared primary services they each provide as part of regular responsibilities, such as completing sociocultural assessments, conducting home visits, collaborating with parents and others involved with students, sharing health/community resources, and individual sessions as deemed appropriate. However, despite the available resources, it often does not help reduce truancy if parents are not held accountable.

Theme 4: Reduction of Truancy

Theme 4 is related to the following questions: Please identify and describe the collaboration with other professionals, agencies, families, or other stakeholders during the truancy process? What are the pros and cons of addressing truancy for Grades K-3? As participants discussed perceptions, barriers, and challenges related to interventions, an interesting finding is that some participants have had involvement with interagency such as FAPT or multidisciplinary teams, and some have not. P3 stated: Unfortunately, I have not had any experience with collaborating with big stakeholders, such as with the FAPT team this school year in regard to truancy. Prior to FAPT, the individuals who collaborate include the school social worker, attendance officers, and the families. P3 affirmed pros and cons, stating that: Cons for addressing truancy include school districts not setting a set of rules and guidelines for an attendance team to follow as well as not putting together a complete attendance team. Another con would be that FAPT and court are the main steps that the school wants the team to take immediately. Pros for addressing truancy are just remembering the purpose of the importance of making sure students are safe and attending school.

P9 also mentioned the problem that occurs with collaboration occurs especially when parents are not receptive to help. P9 stated: Successful interventions cannot occur without the collaboration and support of other individuals. Families must be at the forefront of collaboration. As shared, oftentimes, there are factors involved in the truancy situation, and without communication with them to determine their needs, it is void. I also collaborate with other mental health providers in the area as therapy is often

something that is recommended, considering the factors that may be impacting the child/family. Collaboration should be a key part of every part of our work of attendance.

P11 reviewed tools to support interventions and address attendance barriers. P11 shared: I believe needs assessments are a pro when addressing truancy as it allows school social workers to recognize obstacles and request support proactively. According to P6, it is essential to start at the school level first, and the central collaboration is with teachers, school counselors, administration, social workers, and the parent. We then monitor the attendance, which I typically review within the next month to see if there has been an improvement. If there are no improvements, we refer to an interagency meeting that includes the parent and other professionals if the child is working with someone outside the school. We also invite members representing the court services to determine the best and support interventions to put in place. Thankfully, I have not experienced going to FAPT as of yet. Still, I have heard my co-workers share the process, and it is intense and sometimes discouraging as you may not have every piece of information, including documentation. My goal is to prevent parents from going that route, but often parents appear to lack care.

In discussing effective interventions, participants agreed on the importance of creating toolkits to provide resources, handouts, attendance campaigns, and engaging activities to promote daily attendance. Participants also indicated how important it is to enhance the ability to increase positive engagement. The participants emphasized how daily monitoring helps evaluate attendance and assess and intervene. The participants favored data collection's importance as a valuable practice to identify recurring problems.

In addition, participants shared that most of their experience with addressing truancy is providing ongoing communication and cooperation to involve others. The participants also indicated that attendance records are very beneficial to determining next steps or interventions, educating parents and guardians on the opportunity of student's education, improving a notification system to alert parents of absences, and developing a baseline and target goal yearly goal for attendance.

Conversely, participants noted that truancy is often an unsolidified issue that changes daily. P11 stated: It is important to know students' attendance patterns, which can also inform the use of intervention efforts. I believe for our younger students, we have to keep in mind that they may not be able to pinpoint other reasons for missing school, which is why collaboration with parents is essential. In conclusion, of effective interventions, participants are aware of the many challenges faced in the educational system and consider the importance of "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Participants mentioned the advantages of using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to assess needs and difficult circumstances further.

Summary

This section reviews the results from the 12 participants divided into two focus groups and provides an overview of the findings. Section three describes data collection, validation procedures, and themes supporting the RQs. The study explored school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy interventions for primary school students in Grades K-3. Participants identified their roles and shared a significant change in addressing attendance since the COVID-19 pandemic. One unexpected finding was

that most participants stated the compulsory attendance law is not as effective, especially since COVID-19. The pandemic effects have deepened the impact on education and attendance, despite the option for students to participate virtually. However, participants shared continued efforts to provide services and resources as effective interventions.

Participants agreed that it is vital to abide by the social work code of ethics to continue to advocate for families and students. The determination of interventions to provide varies based on the presenting needs and should include a range of strategies. Participants explained it becomes a barrier when there is a lack of involvement from parents, staff, and stakeholders. Participants indicated that with additional support, the more effective interventions are to enhance students' well-being and the educational outcomes for schools.

Each participant highlighted parental engagement is important however found, that when engagement is not present and a lack of input is provided to assess a student's situation, additional support from community agencies such as court services is considered beneficial. However, it was reported that filing a court petition, such as a parental petition or CHINS, should not be considered the first or the ultimate solution. The findings supported that attendance in elementary school is genuinely the parent or guardian's responsibility. It appeared that the effectiveness of the intervention would depend on the families' situation and the school social worker's approach to the family. It was discovered that when assessing a situation, it is important to use a nonjudgmental approach to build rapport. Participants indicated that it is important for school staff and other workers to be aware of problems interfering with daily school attendance.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

In this action research study, I explored Virginia school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of truancy interventions for primary school students. This knowledge is important because it may help researchers and school leaders to academic performance and absence issues. I sought to identify the most effective strategies to address truancy during elementary school and to understand the services and resources that can be used as part of these efforts. I used qualitative research methods, including individual interviews, surveys, and focus groups. There were 12 participants, each having a MSW degree and at least 2 years of experience as a school social worker. Each theme illustrates participating school social workers' perceptions of adequate truancy interventions. The four themes that emerged were

- assessment of truancy in Grades K-3
- enforcement of the compulsory attendance law
- impact of truancy
- reduction of truancy

This study adds to the expanding research on truancy concerning daily school attendance for students in Grades K-3. I identified six effective interventions (assessing students and families by completing attendance plans/conferences, parental engagement/involvement, collaboration with stakeholder's/community agencies, professional development for teachers and staff, mental health resources, and filing of court petitions) as effective truancy strategies. Increasing parental

engagement/involvement was rated more effective as a truancy intervention as daily school attendance is not solely the child's responsibility and is the parent's responsibility per Virginia Code 22.1-254. In addition, participants shared how consistent attendance reinforces the acquisition of constructive adaptive qualities that support students and families in managing stressors and conflict.

Both focus groups allowed participants to provide their opinions and insight concerning what makes the identified interventions effective and supportive for students and parents. Findings indicated that, when implementing interventions, school social workers should evaluate strategies using a tiered system approach to guide decision-making pertaining to interventions; the interventions are not solely to support students and families but are also relevant to support academic achievement. In addition, participants identified collaboration with community agencies as an intervention to provide further resources to assist parents in the effort to increase daily school attendance. In Section 4, I discuss in detail the study's potential implications for ethical practice in the field of social work and for social change. In addition to offering recommendations for practice and research, I will discuss ways to disseminate the information.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW (2021) Code of Ethics has six core values to support the social work profession's mission. Social workers are employed in various capacities, and fundamental to the social work mission is the enhancement of one's well-being. The three core values concerning this study are dignity and worth of a person, integrity, and competence. The

NASW Code of Ethics emphasizes ethical principles that reflect the profession's core values and standards to guide day-to-day social work practice. The NASW (2012) standards for school social work services reflect the profession's values and are in alignment with the association's code of ethics. The profession of school social work is defined as a specialized practice focusing on education policy, practice models, and research (NASW, 2012).

The NASW (2012) standards for school social work services have 11 standards, two of which are assessment and intervention. Completing assessments is a skill that school social workers use to gather data, assess needs, and understand interactions between students, families, and school staff (NASW, 2012). The findings show that each participant conducted assessments to inform appropriate interventions to remove barriers to attending school and learning. The use of interventions allows school social workers to utilize evidence-based practices based on information gathered during the assessment phase and relevant to concerns (NASW, 2012). This study's findings reveal that each participant's use of interventions was to enrich positive academic experiences, involving the student, parent, school personnel, and community partners.

The social work value of dignity and worth of a person is related to Theme 1 of this research study due to school social workers being cognizant of their role to support others to change and address needs. Participants openly discussed the importance of student autonomy and parental involvement. Applying the code of ethics, school social workers encourage the participation of parents in decisions that can affect their children and empower parents with knowledge and assistance to meet their best interests. Some

participants worked only with Grades K-3, whereas others also worked with additional grade levels. School social workers agreed on the importance of developing students' autonomy by using collaborative decision-making consistent with students and families presenting needs.

The social work value of integrity contributes to working together as a team and behaving in a trusting manner and relates to Themes 2 and 3. Each participant agreed that they take appropriate proactive measures to protect the confidentiality of families and students and advocate for their rights in school settings. The social work value of competence is related to Theme 4 due to challenges with reducing truancy and access to resources and services. Each participant agreed that their contributing factors consist of educating others on the need for school social work services and that their primary responsibility is to promote one's well-being.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The research study's findings indicate how school social workers can take steps to decrease truancy for primary school students by engaging families to prevent chronic truancy as the initial step. Due to the social work problem focusing on sharing perceptions on effective truancy interventions, increasing family engagement may help improve daily school attendance, especially considering how truancy is recognized as a nationwide problem (Maynard et al. 2017). This may help parents and families to understand the compulsory attendance law and school attendance policies as truancy is a complex social issue. Each participant further explored the complex risk factors contributing to truancy and making it problematic for school districts to address. Along

with the truancy law, another action step is a collaboration with community agencies to support the implementation of interventions to address the social issue, which include support from court services, law enforcement, social services, community services board, and mental health agencies.

Each participant in the study agreed that there is a need for increasing the school-based approach and connecting or referring students and families for wrap-around services. Using a person-in-environment perspective, participants decided that truancy affects systems not only limited to family but the individual, school, and community (Hutchison, 2019). Each method affects the outcome of success for students in Grades K-3. It would be vital for school social workers to understand all systems to address truancy and know how it affects a student's daily attendance.

Impact on My Social Work Practice

In social work, a micro approach involves meeting with individuals, families, and small groups to help them identify mental, emotional, or social concerns that negatively impact the quality of life (Hutchison, 2019). The mezzo approach focuses on developing and implementing initiatives that involve community support from neighborhoods, schools, and even city districts (Hutchison, 2019). Working as a school social worker in Virginia and recently obtaining my clinical license, my plan is to support and advocate for students using a micro approach. Many students I serve have experienced poverty, mental health issues, and a lack of resources that impact them from attending school. One important job duty of a school social worker is to help students to cope with problems faced at school and at home. In addition, I will continue to use a mezzo approach to

support school social workers by providing direct interventions and initiatives to increase academic success. Based on the findings from this study, it is important to evaluate the contributing risk factors for school social workers to be aware of which interventions are effective and efficient. The impact of this study shows how dedicated school social workers are when providing evidence-based interventions that are effective for working with primary school students in Grades K-3.

Due to parental engagement being considered a challenge, it was important to explore how school social workers what they identify can or cannot work for students and families and what resources appear appropriate. Before becoming a school social worker, I completed a practicum in a school setting during graduate school, which increased my interest in obtaining a career in the education system. My strengths and passion for being a school social worker and recognizing the challenges I have witnessed with addressing truancy increased my interest in this social issue. The study findings not only clarify school social workers' views of the most effective interventions but identify the benefits of family and community engagement. Networking and building relationships with other school social workers to address the social issue of truancy may help increase awareness. In this way, the study contributes to the existing research on the support that is needed to improve school attendance.

Potential Limitations of the Research

This qualitative study had several limitations occurring during the research process. Due to the study being limited only to Virginia school social workers with at least 2 years of experience, I had hoped to obtain the maximum number of fifteen

participants. It was a pleasure having the VASSW share my recruitment flyer; however, recruitment efforts did not immediately occur, despite the flyer being shared with a pool of school social workers. However, I was able to secure 12 participants and overcame this limitation. Each participant was required to have an MSW, licensed/endorsement as a school social worker in Virginia with 2-3 years of experience, work in a public school division in Virginia that serves students in Grades K-3 and identify work with students as providing interventions, support, and resources to address attendance and truancy. Due to these factors, the findings of the study results are not generalizable to the demographics of school social workers serving the capacity of the education system. Even though this is a limitation, the findings can be used and are beneficial to school social workers addressing truancy to increase the use of effective interventions and increase efforts to understand barriers.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to change my initial plan to schedule face-to-face interviews and focus groups. I used the Zoom platform to conduct interviews and focus groups in which there were minimum technological issues. However, the limitation of using the Zoom online platform did not impede the collection of data from participants. Each participant was familiar with zoom and complied with the virtual rules set forth during each meeting. The research and semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the literature review focusing on school attendance and truancy. The themes were generated from the feedback provided. Although the study was limited to school social workers as professionals working directly with families and students providing interventions, this study did not interview parents and students, nor did it

interview additional school personnel. Although this may be a limitation, the findings of the study provide an overview of school social workers' perceptions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Overall, based on the study's results, the findings can be applied to the field of social work with the recommendation to support school social workers to integrate interventions to support learning and enhance social and emotional growth for students in Grades K-3. The findings indicated that each participant is aware of the complex issues of truancy. To overcome this challenge, the findings discovered how school social workers identified the importance of rapport building with families, students, school personnel, and outside agencies. The process of engagement is found to assist school social workers in assisting families and students and was a theme supported throughout the literature.

Since school social workers' perspectives were gathered, future researchers can further explore how beneficial it is to collaboratively work with additional stakeholders to address truancy. As described, it can be helpful to apply the person-in-environment (PIE) approach as a way to increase positive outcomes. Hutchison (2019) defined person-in-environment as a basic approach to examining and assessing one's situation. In addition, social workers utilize system theory as a unique tool when working with families daily (Hutchison, 2019). The person-in-environment approach can be used to gain insight into various relationships and communities that a person has. Since person-in-environment is a suggestion alongside the use of system and empowerment theory, the findings of this

research are to allow families and parents to understand their strengths and abilities toward achieving goals, such as improving their child's daily attendance.

Dissemination Possibilities

The dissemination of research findings can support the improvement of truancy interventions that are useful for addressing truancy for students enrolled in Grades K-3 in the state of Virginia. The goal of this research was to contribute and bring awareness to school social workers' perceptions of youth experiencing truancy. The support of this research is to improve the well-being of students and families and to develop preventive measures. Disseminating this information, it would be beneficial to provide a copy to school social workers in Virginia who may feel the need to understand how their efforts are essential to the field of education. Although school social work is a specialty field in social work, school social workers are educators providing interventions for social-emotional behavior and educational execution. Participants involved in this study will receive a digital copy provided by email and will be able to see their contributions. Participants are encouraged to share the study with additional individuals who will benefit from this research. I also will disseminate the study to the VASSW by providing a digital copy to bring awareness.

Implications for Social Change

This study's primary implication was to increase understanding for school social workers providing interventions to primary-students age's five to eight that are enrolled in Grades K-3. It offers research to deepen considerate barriers within the practice and how to effectively engage parents, students, school personnel, and community agencies in

eliminating truancy. With the evolving changes in education since the COVID-19 pandemic, the study indicated the need for understanding how interventions can be theory-driven. For example, interventions and truancy programs have a theoretical justification based on how accurate information is and how interventions are supported by empirical research. In addition, the next implication would be understanding sociocultural relevance as programs are often tailored to cultural norms and should include planning and implementation. Participants each conveyed the desire for more support from school personnel and preventative approaches such as professional development on the truancy law and increased measures on school attendance procedures. Participants also elaborated on addressing non-attendance when first recognized and indicated sharing resources on attendance at the start of the school year may reduce truancy.

Results of this study enclose the methods in which participants have efficaciously utilized interventions to reduce truancy and support students to achieve academically. The findings suggest the need for preventative strategies and collaboration with school personnel and community agencies for chronically or habitually truant youth. This would be helpful to support the implementation in various school districts and improve outcome evaluations. Much of the data gathered in this study is supported by school social workers working directly with families and students truant from school. Therefore, this could imply considerations for a research study on gathering data from families and students in elementary identified as truants.

Summary

I interviewed 12 Virginia school social workers about their perspectives and experiences inclusively addressing attendance for primary school students. The results show that each participant understood the importance of assessing and engaging parents and students in using best practices to reduce truancy. Considering their knowledge, abilities, skills, and standards central to social work, school social workers are culturally sensitive when providing the necessary input to assist with attendance. Each participant shared how they advocate and utilize evidence-based practices to engage the use of effective interventions. Although interventions were identified as parental engagement/involvement, collaboration with community agencies, completion of attendance plans, professional development, and filing of truancy petitions, more research is encouraged to determine additional interventions that are considered most effective.

This study helps capture how school social workers foster positive collaboration, and the results of this study are compatible with the literature review. The findings reveal that it is necessary to review the literature to identify other effective interventions to support the initiative to implement strategies. Participants in this study agreed that it is vital to evaluate the outcomes of interventions to confirm that it is accomplishing the goals and objectives of a school's mission. Based on the findings, school social workers are encouraged to advocate for change as many agree that compulsory attendance is not as effective. Advocacy can help regarding policies and procedures to increase the implementation of effective interventions and decrease the chances of seeking legal

remedy. Successful interventions ultimately require commitment and prioritizing time management to ensure the efficacy of skills.

In conclusion, school social workers should continue to work closely and effectively with parents, school personnel, and community agencies to warrant involvement in the problem-solving process. As parental engagement was identified as the most effective intervention, participants further elaborated on how concerning it is when attempting to engage uninvolved or problematic parents. Therefore, participants also agreed on the importance of providing daily contacts such as telephone calls, emails, letters, conferences, or school notes as other interventions to support contacting parents. The consistency for daily contact is the intersect to track daily attendance. Participants further shared how tier-one interventions increase parental involvement, whereas tier-two focuses on contingency management strategies to increase collaboration with other stakeholders. The ultimate goal is for tier one and tier two approaches to become effective in reducing tier-three risk, such as filing petitions.

Regarding the research, this study encourages future research to focus on how truancy occurs and how more than one approach will support families and students. This study identified several factors related to truancy and how important it is to consider each to help families and youth attend school. Although the definition of truancy depends on one's state, the underlying definition is defined as students who are habitually absent from school without parental awareness. It is also essential to focus not on the definition but on ways to increase daily school attendance. In summary, truancy remains a very multifaceted phenomenon. Using a person-in-environment approach as a school social

worker can help understand that each family and student's situation is unique. Using effective intervention in elementary school will help support students as they one-day transition to middle and high school.

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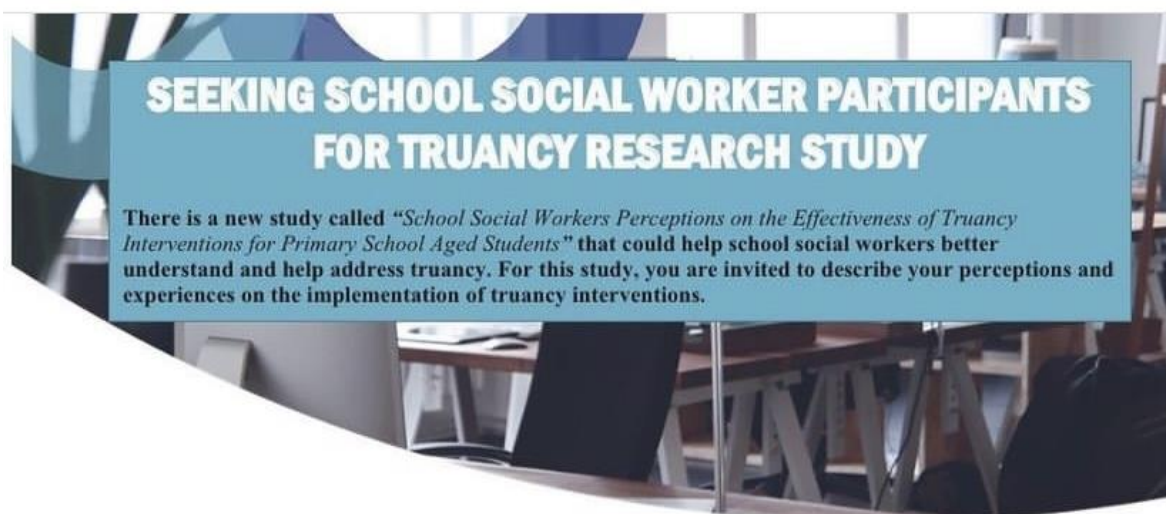
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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



This research is part of the doctoral study for Laniesha Stephens, a DSW student at Walden University.

About the study:

1. Audio recorded 90-minute focus group held via zoom. (there will be two focus groups with at least 5-6, school social workers per group). Video recording is not permitted.
2. Questions covered will include truancy interventions school social workers find are most useful for primary school-aged students in grade K-3, description of collaboration with other stakeholders, perceptions on effective and ineffective interventions, and what strategies help support educational and behavioral outcomes.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

1. Be licensed/endorsed as a school social worker in Virginia with 2-3 years of experience.
2. Work in a public school division in Virginia that serves students in grades K-3.
3. Identify your work with students as providing interventions, supports, and resources to address attendance and truancy.

To confidentially volunteer, please email Laniesha Stephens at

Subject: Research Study

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Individual and Focus Group Interviews

Hello School Social Workers,

My name is Laniesha Stephens-Dunn, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting an action research study exploring school social workers' perceptions of truancy interventions' effectiveness for primary school students. As the researcher, I would like to welcome you to the focus group. Thank you for taking the time to join me and share your perceptions and experiences.

The purpose of this study is to identify potential solutions when addressing the critical importance of chronic truancy, synthesize the use of truancy interventions on the scope of the issue, and share insight on how parents, schools, and the community can help address how truancy affects a student's progress with education. You were selected because you can help by sharing your experiences, roles, knowledge, challenges about truancy in grades K-3rd. The results will provide school social workers with greater awareness on addressing chronic truancy for students in grades K-3rd and the use of effective and ineffective interventions.

I want to share the following ground rules:

- There are no right or wrong answers. Every participant's experiences and opinions are essential.
- The session will be audio-recorded and will not be video recorded.
- Screen sharing capability is disabled.
- Private chats are disabled, allowing the participants to chat only with the entire group if needed.

- Participants are asked to be in an accessible place from distractions, sound, and noise during the focus group.
- One person will speak at a time.
- During the open dialogue, communicate appropriately, embrace experiences, and celebrate differences.
- My role as the facilitator will be to guide the discussion.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your highest degree?
3. How long have you worked as a school social worker in Virginia?
4. Do you work with additional grade levels besides grades K-3rd?

Interview Questions

1. How did you come to be a school social worker?
2. What is your experience as a school social worker addressing truancy with students in grades K-3rd?
3. Do you believe truancy is an immediate concern? Please elaborate on your response?
4. How are students in grades K-3rd referred to you, or how do you come in contact with students identified as truant?
5. How effective do you find Virginia's compulsory attendance law?

Focus Group Semistructured Interview Questions

1. We are here to discuss perceptions on addressing truancy in grades K-3rd. What are your thoughts about assessing students for truancy?

2. Who do you involve in the delivery of interventions to address truancy?

Probe 1: How are students involved in the intervention?

Probe 2: How are parents/guardians involved in the intervention?

3. How do you feel about effective truancy interventions?

4. How do you feel about ineffective truancy interventions?

5. How do you feel when considering social and cultural factors when deciding on interventions to address truancy?

Probe: How does mental health diagnosis influence interventions?

6. When implementing strategies to decrease truancy, how do you consider the interventions help to improve educational and behavioral outcomes?

7. Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to attendance interventions between male and female students? If so, please describe how?

8. Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to attendance interventions for different minority groups? If so, please describe how?

9. Please identify and describe the collaboration with other professionals, agencies, families, or other stakeholders during the truancy process?

Probe: How do community resources come into play when addressing truancy?

10. What are the pros and cons of addressing truancy for grades K-3rd?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share that would benefit from decreasing truancy?