

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: CAREGIVER
PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO CHILDREN'S
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

By

ANDREA D. RAINS

Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1987

Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
2001

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Kathy Curry

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Mary Jo Self

Committee Member

Dr. Ashlyn Feigener

Committee Member

Dr. Tonya Hammer

Outside Committee Member

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“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” (Lau Tzu). Writing, reading, and researching have always been my academic endearment. One for which I have deep affection. However, the undertaking of writing this dissertation coupled with the rigorous coursework and hours upon hours of research and data analysis was a behemoth of a task that I could not possibly have understood when I took that first single step.

One late. October afternoon, I recall a specific conversation with a young bank teller with whom I had befriended over time. We had gotten to know each other well enough to know that we enjoyed each other’s company and conversation. She told me that she was toying with the idea of entering a master’s degree program but had some apprehension. Seizing any opportunity to encourage another person to further her education, I quickly responded with my personal story. “Sara (pseudonym),” I said. “I have recently been accepted to the doctoral program at OSU. I decided to undertake that challenge when I realized that I would either say to myself, five years down the road, *look what I did* or *I wish I would have done that*. I resolved within myself that I didn’t want to have regrets and say to myself, “I wish that I would have done that.” So I took that first single step.

She momentarily paused the transaction, looked up at me with a surprised, yet solid understanding of what I was trying to communicate. “I never thought about it that way,” she said. Since that time, I have repeated that story to many others. Five years turned to six and now I can say, “Look what I did!” I am so glad that I took that first single step.

Of course, that first single step quickly turned into a lengthy journey; a journey that I could not have done alone. There are many people to thank who supported, encouraged, and guided me. In particular, I have to acknowledge gratefulness to my family who often did things without me so I could hole up in my office to work.

First, a huge thanks goes to my family: my husband Shan and my two daughters Kristye and Shelbye, both OSU graduates, plus their spouses Shane and Ryan, respectively, also OSU graduates. Go Pokes! It’s a family affair! Shan helped lighten the load by using numerous hours of his time to drive me to class (sixty miles one-way) once or twice a week for four-and-a-half years. I was more than grateful to have his company on those dark, late nights of torrential rains and spring thunderstorms. Kristye and Shelbye made certain to ask how things were going and constantly encouraged me on days when mental fatigue had set in. I must include a special thank you to Ezra and Kellan, my two grandsons. Their hugs were priceless and brought many smiles to my face when I needed moments of joy.

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Name: ANDREA RAINS

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Title of Study: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: CAREGIVER PERCEPTIONS OF
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Abstract: Chronic absenteeism is a hidden national crisis. Routine and consistent school attendance is necessary for students to academically succeed and develop into successful citizens. Educators and policy makers across the nation have been and are trying to better understand this hidden national crisis of chronic absenteeism. When key stakeholders understand what it is and why it is happening, then they can better understand how to deal with it. One area of chronic absenteeism that has been largely overlooked is that of elementary aged students. Students of this age rely on their caregivers to ensure they attend school regularly. This qualitative case study focuses on the caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance and caregiver perceptions as to the importance of school attendance as they relate to actual school attendance. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is utilized to explore the interrelatedness of family perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance as it relates to actual student attendance. When school boards, teachers, and staff members recognize exactly what barriers parents perceive as preventing their child from attending school, then they can be better informed when making programming decisions for their schools which will help improve student attendance, reduce chronic absenteeism, and support families as they strive to overcome perceived barriers to school attendance.

chronic absenteeism, school attendance, elementary aged students, parent perceptions, ecological systems theory, national crisis, barriers to school attendance, elementary student attendance

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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: CAREGIVER PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO CHILDREN'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Education can only fulfill its promise as the great equalizer – a force that can overcome differences in privilege and background – when we work to ensure that students are in school every day and receive the supports they need to learn and thrive.

United States Department of Education, 2016

Each day that a student is absent from school is a lost opportunity for learning. Routine and consistent school attendance is necessary for students to develop into well-educated, successful citizens, who will make important and meaningful contributions to society (Jacobsen, Meeder & Voskuil, 2016). A few absences, for any reason, in a given school year can all too easily turn into excessive absences. These excessive absences are officially referred to as chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, as defined by the United States Department of Education's (USDE) National Civil Rights Data Collection (NCRDC), involves a student missing 15 or more days of school for any reason in a given academic year. In a recent chronic absenteeism analysis for the 2015-2016 school year, eight million students in the United States were identified as chronically absent. Not only were eight million students chronically absent, but there were an additional 800,000 students chronically absent since the inaugural reporting data of 2012-2014 (USCRDC, 2016). In essence, nearly 15% of all American children missed more than 10% of an

entire school year, which amounts to approximately 18 or more days a year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

This problem of chronic absenteeism is being publicly acknowledged in communities across the United States. Billboard advertisements, website banners, and hallway posters are but a few examples of ways that communities are garnering attention from families, educators, and policy makers in order to reduce chronic absenteeism. For example, the website for the United States Department of Education refers to chronic absenteeism as a *Hidden Educational Crisis* (USDE, 2016). In hallways across the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, posters encourage student attendance by reminding students that, “90% of Success is Showing Up. School Attendance Counts. Be There.”

Coordinated community action and initiatives such as these are searching for the underlying causes of local chronic absenteeism. Motivations from groups like these are noteworthy given that current student achievement literature points to increasing academic achievement by improving and increasing student attendance (Balfanz, 2016, Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004, Mc Cray, 2006, Nauer, 2016, Romero & Lee, 2007).

In search for answers regarding the underlying cause of chronic absenteeism, the United States Civil Rights Data Collection (USCRDC) began, in the 2013-2014 school year, requiring every public school in the country to report the number of students who are chronically absent each school year. Chronic absenteeism reports being required of schools placed educators in an

unfamiliar position. Within a short amount of time, educators were faced with reporting a new demographic while grappling with what it actually meant. Whether or not harmful effects or consequences of chronic absenteeism existed, also challenged educators (Chang, H. Russell-Tucker, C., Sullivan, K., 2016).

Since school district reporting of chronic absenteeism is now a requirement (USCRDC, 2016) in the United States, most states have begun to use a measure of chronic absenteeism which is a specific calculation used for their schools' or districts' end-of-year accountability report card (Nadworny, 2017). Troubling attendance data have caught the attention of school leaders and educators nationwide (Chang, Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016) whether it be from required demographic reporting or declining academic performance. Although educators have historically been concerned about student attendance, they have not necessarily been concerned about chronic absenteeism (Nauer, 2016). Granted the national and state accountability measures require chronic absenteeism reporting, new national data are reporting alarming trends in increases of chronic absenteeism. With this in mind, implications suggest that it is paramount for educators and policy makers better understand the harmful effects of chronic absenteeism. One way this could be done is to explore caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance. Since many students rely on caregivers to either transport them to school or encourage them to attend school, this understanding may provide insight regarding student attendance (Balfanz, 2016).

What is known about chronic absenteeism is that circumstances such as poverty, community violence, and health challenges, all potential barriers to student attendance, often

make it difficult for some students to access learning opportunities at school (Sheldon, 2017). With this in mind, a widely growing campaign known as *Absences Add Up*, which is part of the *Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*, has placed caregivers at the center of efforts to increase student attendance. Their campaign emphasizes to caregivers the importance of consistent school attendance while providing posters and strategically placed billboards that remind caregivers of the negative impact that absences have on their children's academic outcomes. Improved understanding of caregiver perspectives to barriers of student attendance may increase school attendance, especially in the younger grades where students depend upon caregivers to facilitate their attendance at school.

Regarding which students are chronically absent, collected government data, as reported by the USC (2016), will divulge a great deal of demographic information that was previously unknown. However, it fails to explore the "why" of chronic absenteeism. Another point overlooked is failing to explain barriers to student attendance from a caregiver's perspective. Understanding caregiver perspectives of barriers to student attendance may provide important insight since many students, especially younger students, rely on caregivers for school attendance (Tekin, 2011).

Researchers have found that caregiver attitudes towards school, whether positive or negative, coupled with caregiver beliefs about the importance of school attendance, have a strong correlation with student absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Since caregiver attitudes and beliefs contribute to their behaviors, it is of benefit to educators, policy

makers, and researchers to gain insight into caregiver beliefs of the importance of student attendance and their perceptions of barriers, if any, to school attendance.

Certain caregiver behaviors that have been shown to predict lower levels of school absenteeism (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; Tekin, 2011) are monitoring children's whereabouts, engaging children in discussions about school, and volunteering at school. Although results of this type of research divulge the nature of caregiver engagement behaviors that encourage school attendance, they do not indicate what caregivers perceive as barriers to school attendance. Because attendance, according to Pellerin (2005), is the strongest indicator of student school engagement that leads to academic success (Pellerin, 2005), then understanding factors, such as how caregivers perceive the fundamental importance of school attendance coupled with caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance is vital for student success (Van Acker & Wheby, 2000).

Attempts to diminish chronic absenteeism is a worthwhile focus because students who are chronically absent are at risk of falling behind in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Jacobsen, Meeder, & Voskuil, 2016), dropping out of school (Jacobsen, Meeder, & Voskuil, 2016), or developing a variety of harmful mental and physical health conditions (Garry, 1996; Van Cleave, Gormaker, and Perrin, 2010). Research (Chang, 2010) suggests that two absences per month across nine months of school means that a student is less likely to graduate (Chang, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Additionally, two absences per month through nine months of school indicates that a student is likely to fail math or reading or both (Chang, 2010;

Nauer, 2016). According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), approximately 40% of high school sophomores who miss 10 or more days of school will not graduate from high school. In light of this information, finding solutions to the problem of chronic absenteeism is paramount and urgent.

Since this qualitative case study is designed to explore caregiver perceptions as to the importance of school attendance and perceptions of barriers to school attendance, then exploring how schools influence caregivers and caregivers influence schools in a *bi-directional* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) sense, then applying Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the study will illuminate how a child's school experience and family experience contribute to student attendance. To get to the heart of the matter, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will be utilized to explore the interrelationship between caregiver perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to school attendance, and actual attendance. Since this theory places the child in the center of the school experience, family experience, and even neighborhood experience, known as the child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), then my research inquiry can be anchored in authenticity of a child's world, thus producing *meaning in context* (Merriam, 1998).

Problem Statement

School attendance has become a national priority largely due to findings in the literature regarding the relationship between student attendance and student success in school (Chang, Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Specifically, research suggests that

a child's attendance record may be the biggest factor influencing his/her academic success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Pellerin, 2005; Sheldon, 1997). However, while school attendance may be a national priority, as indicated by the USCRDC, some schools are successful with increasing student attendance and others are not (USDCCR, 2016). For example, for the 2013- 2014 school year, approximately 500 school districts reported that 30% or more of their student body was chronically absent thus demonstrating the large number of schools and districts that are not successful with school attendance, (USDCCR, 2016).

One reason for this anomaly may be explained in terms of family perceptions regarding the value of school attendance and our own lack of understanding of barriers to attendance as families perceive and experience this. Additionally, findings in the literature suggest that children whose families are engaged in their education, experience higher attendance rates than those whose caregivers are not engaged (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2015). However, little is known about how families perceive barriers to school attendance.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is utilized in this study to explain the interrelationship of family and caregiver perceptions regarding the importance of attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance at the elementary level (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2015; Pellerin, 2005; Van Acker & Wheby, 2000).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to explore the interrelatedness of family perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance and actual student attendance.

Research Questions

Research questions for this study:

How are family perceptions regarding attendance/barriers to attendance and actual student attendance interrelated?

1. What are family perceptions of the importance of their children's attendance at school?
2. Do perceptions regarding the importance of attendance differ between families of high attending students and low attending students? If so, how?
3. What are family perceptions of barriers to their children's attendance?
4. How does Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explain the interrelationship between family perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to attendance and actual attendance at school?

Theoretical Framework

According to Merriam (1998), the structure, scaffolding, and frame of study forms the theoretical framework. Theories are necessary for research and are conceived in order to explain,

predict, and understand phenomena and to extend contextual knowledge (Creswell, 2014) about our world (Yazan, 2015). Theory of knowledge underlying and serving as the foundation for research is epistemology (Creswell, 2014). It is from the foundation of epistemology that the building blocks for theoretical perspective are fashioned and composed (Crotty, 1998).

The disciplinary orientation and stance (Merriam, 1998) that I bring to the study are deeply entrenched in terms of educational concepts and theories (Merriam, 1998); hence it creates the type of lens (Merriam, 1998) that I apply when viewing the world. In this chapter, I will outline my proposed research map by considering my own philosophical orientation and epistemological bent (Merriam, 1998). Since research is “producing knowledge about the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 3), I locate myself, philosophically, within the case (Merriam, 1998) in order to determine the most suited theory to guide my study. Three key fundamental considerations that will guide my study are the type of research, qualitative case study; the epistemological perspective, constructivism; and the theoretical framework, Ecological Systems Theory.

Qualitative Case Study

Qualitative research is defined as an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry (Merriam, 1998). One form of this inquiry, and the form selected for my research, is qualitative case study. Case study, as outlined by Merriam (1998) concentrates on a single phenomenon: the case. The case of my study, chronic absenteeism at the elementary school level, will focus on holistic descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon. Holistic descriptions and comprehensive explanations will bring depth, abundance, and lavishness of detail to my research. In a qualitative case study, the researcher intends to unearth, or bring to light, the

interface of crossing points that poise themselves as significant characteristics, elements, or features of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998), which is why and how lavish details can emerge. Additionally, viewpoints from this case will be complex as opposed to single and narrow (Creswell, 2014).

Epistemological Perspective

In like fashion, the theoretical perspective or framework is defined as a derivation from the stance that the researcher brings to the study (Merriam, 1998). Since I am an educational researcher, my stance stems from my disciplinary orientation (Merriam, 1998): a constructivist-minded public school educator in the Midwest. Further, disciplinary orientation is influenced by specific vocabulary relevant to my profession: certain types of concepts in the field and of course certain persuasions of theories (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (2009) also highlights the importance of “learning in the reflection on experience” (p. 459) as a key component to the constructivist learning theory. Reflection will be an ongoing learning tool throughout the study; especially during the data collection and data analysis portion. I couple data collection and data analysis together intentionally because Merriam posits that the two should and do occur simultaneously. This approach to data collection and data analysis is discussed in greater detail in Chapter III.

Theory

Relevant to the education profession and applicable in theory is a theoretical framework or context that will draw upon concepts, terms, and definitions of chronic absenteeism and caregiver perceptions of barriers to student attendance. The identified applicable theory, the Ecological Systems Theory, identifies five environmental systems within which an individual

interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory, as formulated by American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, will frame my study and provide direction to help generate specific research questions, as outlined above. In short, this qualitative case study is designed to explore family perceptions of barriers to student attendance at the elementary level and family perceptions of the importance of attendance in order to make sense of how one or both influences student attendance at a Midwestern elementary school in Oklahoma.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, American psychologist, developed the Ecological Systems Theory in order to explain or illustrate how the fundamental, built-in qualities of a child and his environment interact to influence or determine how he will grow and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Essentially, the Bronfenbrenner model organizes conditions and circumstances of the child's development into five levels of external influence; self, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as shown in figure 2. These five levels of influence nest themselves into a set of family dynamics that reference the family structure within a child's world as his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem encompasses the relationships or interactions a child has with his/her environment, namely immediate surroundings such as family, school, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, one can argue that an elementary child's school attendance is not just made up of interactions between the child and school; rather it is made up of behaviors and dynamics that include a bi-directional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) set of interactions between the family and the child. For this reason, the child's school experience, family experience, and his relationship with his own immediate surroundings within the

microsystem provides support for the utility of Bronfenbrenner's theory to explain the interrelationship between perceived barriers to student attendance and perceptions as to the importance of school attendance.

I speculate that caregiver perceptions of barriers to student attendance and the value that caregivers place on school attendance could influence actual student attendance. My study will add to this understanding by exploring the perceptions of caregivers who are faced with attendance challenges, coupled alongside the perceptions of caregivers who are not faced with attendance challenges. Additionally, understanding caregiver perceptions of barriers to attendance with school could aid in finding new ways or reasons to meaningfully connect to caregivers with schools in an effort to increase student attendance.

Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

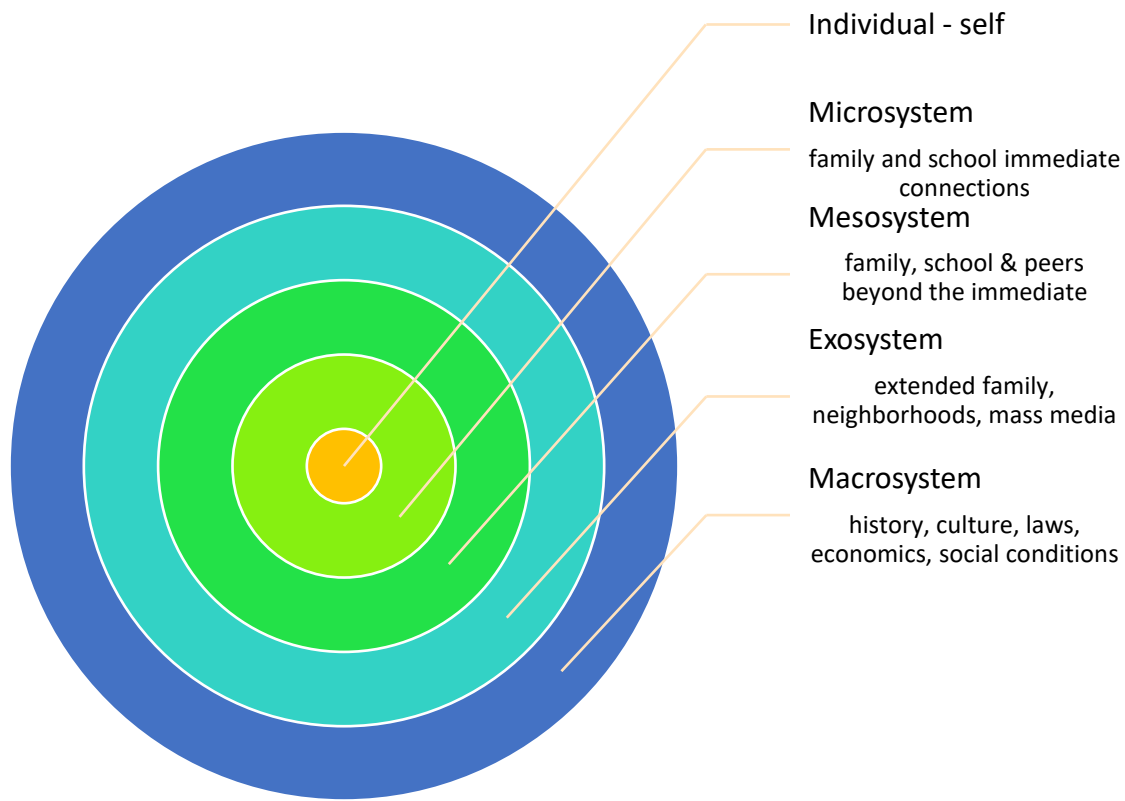


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Adapted from Sue Marie, 2017

Procedures

Qualitative inquiry “requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 1998. p. 1); therefore, the best collection instrument is the human. Central to qualitative research is interviewing, observing, and analyzing (Merriam, 1998); it is the human instrument that is best suited for this task (Merriam, 1998). Since my research inquiry focuses on meaning in context (Merriam, 1998), qualitative case study is the selected methodology for this research study.

This qualitative study seeks to explore and make meaning of chronic absenteeism, using as its cornerstone caregiver perceptions of barriers to children's attendance. Since caregiver perceptions play a key role in this research, the primary participants of the study will be caregivers of elementary aged children who attend one Midwest elementary school in Oklahoma. Most of the data collected for this study will come from interviews with the participants.

According to Merriam (1998), the interview structure is a continuum that ranges from highly structured or even standardized to flexible, exploratory, and unstructured. Interview questions that fall into the latter category flow much like a conversation. As a researcher, I know that getting good data for my study means asking good interview questions (Merriam, 1998). Extending that notion, is the factor of the interview tone as well. Therefore, the questions that I have designed for the interview fall somewhat in the middle of the continuum with a bent towards a flexible, conversation-type tone and manner (Merriam, 1998). For example, I plan to use a semi-structured interview protocol for the twelve caregivers whom I interview; however, additional questions may be asked to elucidate meanings. Although the questions will serve as a guide, they will be asked in an informal manner while embedded into a conversational-style interview.

Piloting the interview questions will be necessary for quality interviews that capture quality data. During the pilot interviews I will practice for technique improvement and to identify questions that may seem confusing or yield useless data. Furthermore, the pilot interviews may uncover a need for new questions that I may not have considered, as suggested by the participant (Merriam, 1998).

In addition to the interviews, I will engage in on-site school observations, collect documents distributed by the school, and gather documents and/or artifacts as published in the media or online. Doing so will provide to me a greater depth of understanding of the phenomena. Using multiple sources of data to confirm emerging findings, *triangulation*, (Merriam, 1998) is an invaluable procedure to establish validity in my case. For example, as in my case, gathering data from a front office observation, an interview with a parent who checks in at the front office, and a note sent home from the school to parents about the morning drop-off/check-in procedures will provide to me, the researcher, multiple views of the same phenomena. Hence triangulating these multiple sources of data become more than a technological solution for ensuring the validity (Merriam, 1998). Instead, it becomes a shift from technological to integrated with a reliance on the *holistic* understanding of the case or particular phenomena (Mathison, as cited in Merriam, 1998). In essence, all of the data from the multiple sources combine in a triangulated manner, in order to validate case study findings (Merriam, 1998).

Another observation that will be important to my understanding of caregiver perceptions will be observing morning drop-off, as reference above. I will watch for procedures, protocols, or rules for caregivers as they drop off their children at school. Important aspects of this data include whether or not caregivers are allowed to get out of their car and walk their child to the building, how much access to the building they have once they arrive, and the types of interactions between family members and school personnel.

Formal documents such as state report cards, district policies, and accountability reports, will be gathered with a simple online search. Likewise, informal documents such as notes from

teachers to families or electronic communication messages from the principal to families, that address attendance issues will also be collected. Each document and artifact will be used to build a comprehensive view of the schools' daily routine and caregivers' perceptions of it. To summarize, front office observations, parking lot observations, formal and informal documents and artifacts combine to satisfy triangulation of the data in a holistic manner thus combining for a greater depth of understanding of the phenomena (Merriam, 1998).

Methodologist

As a qualitative researcher, I am the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data (Merriam, 1998). My approach in this case study will be to act as a detective by considering everything as important. Consequently, I will search for clues, follow up on leads, identify missing potential pieces and then put it all together (Merriam, 1998) as a neatly constructed mosaic or completed jigsaw puzzle. Personally, as a researcher, I have a great deal of patience, thrive in unstructured situations, and enjoy ambiguity (Merriam, 1998). When combined, these attributes will bring strength to my study because the methodology will be steady and consistent. Inasmuch, from designing the study to analyzing the data, Merriam's case study methodology (1998) is the best fit for my research.

Initially, a plan or map becomes the research design to help answer the research questions (Merriam, 1998) and inductively build concepts rather than test concepts. Closely, on the heels of identifying a research design, is a determination of a theoretical framework that frames the study and is derived from the orientation or stance of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Merriam,

(1998) describes disciplinary orientation, or the grounded theoretical approach, as the lens through which the researcher views the world.

Deeply seated in Merriam's (1998) methodology is the importance of a review of the literature. Not taking time for a thorough review of the literature could result in negative consequences for the researcher (Merriam, 1998). For example, expose his/her limited knowledge of what has been researched and could risk naively stating a finding that has already been published. Although the literature review is foundational for the problem to be investigated, it can also serve as a vehicle that demonstrates how the study will refine or advance what is already known (Merriam, 1998).

Merriam (1998) also emphasizes the importance of accounting for validity and reliability, ensuring trustworthiness, conducting the investigation in an ethical manner and eliminating or reducing bias (Merriam, 1998). To begin with, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the term reliability in the traditional sense, "seems to be something of a misfit" when applied to qualitative research. In this case study research, reliability will be achieved when the results of the findings are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 1998). External validity, in the context of qualitative case study is the ability for the results of the study to be generalized. Merriam suggests that qualities such as rich, thick descriptions contribute to external validity. Inasmuch, integrity in the form of ethics will serve as a wrap-around protocol which is meant to embody and penetrate the entire process of the study. Peer educators, politicians, and policy-makers depend on ethics and trustworthiness to a research standard. Since I will be

communicating and contributing results to a wide variety of audiences like the aforementioned, then an ethical approach to the study is non-negotiable.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the primary researcher, I am also the primary data collection instrument (Merriam, 1998). My goal for this study is to conduct effective interviews that will yield quality data that specifically addresses the research questions.

Accordingly, conducting the interviews, collecting data, and participating in data analysis will be the heart of the study. For these reasons, ongoing reflection on all data throughout the study will be of paramount importance (Merriam, 1998). Although data from the interviews will be a large portion of the study's data, I will rely on additional multiple sources like government documents, school artifacts, and on-site observations in order to triangulate the data. Data Collection will occur through the 2019 calendar year.

Somewhat unique to Merriam's methodological approach is the immersion of the researcher into the data collection and data analysis simultaneously (Merriam, 1998), resulting in a constant comparative method of analysis. Immersing into both data collection and analysis is highly desirable to my research design since my design heavily relies on interviews as the main source of data. Merriam's methodology also describes themes or conceiving categories indicated by that data (Merriam, 1998) are specific parts of the map or design for meaningfully decomposing then re-composing the data to reflect the purpose of the research and clearly answer the research questions. Again, this is outlined in greater detail in Chapter III.

Sample

Interviews were the primary source of data for this case study, so a determination of whom to interview (Merriam, 1998) was made early in the process. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants on the basis of what they could contribute to my understanding (Merriam, 1998) of the value or importance that caregivers placed on their child's school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance. As described in more detail below, I selected twelve interview participants from an original pool of forty caregivers.

Population

Setting against a backdrop of hazy, powder-blue skies, placid prairie grasses, grazing, in the distance, beef cattle is *Smithton Elementary North* (pseudonym), a Midwestern rural school. Smithton's enrollment of nearly 700 students makes up more than half of the district's total enrollment of 1,157 students. The campus has two separate buildings, a PK-2nd grade Lower Elementary and a 3rd – 6th grade Upper Elementary, which both house a library but share a cafeteria and gym. Smithton Elementary North met criteria for the study: an elementary school of any PK-6 combination, a minimum student enrollment number of at least 250, and an adequate sample pool of caregivers, of whom I could potentially interview, who have either a low attending or high attending elementary student. Greater details of demographics and why these criteria are important are outlined in Chapter 3.

Significance of Study

Practical Implications

Smithton Elementary North is located in a state that has 44% of its elementary students chronically absent; this is these students missed 10% or more school days during the 2015-2016

school year. The held belief that chronic absence, missing 10% or more of school, can have adverse consequences to academic achievement throughout a child's life (Change, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018) could influence the way schools or districts view chronic absenteeism. Therefore, a study of the interrelationship of caregiver values on school attendance and their perceptions of barriers to attendance could provide fresh or new perspectives towards elementary students who are chronically absent. Potentially, findings in the study could influence the practice of how educators respond to families of chronically absent students. It is my hope that this study might better enable school-related decision makers to create new or improved methods, initiatives, or programs to reduce chronic absenteeism. The results of this study will inform public school educators, district administrator, truancy officers, school resource officers, beginning teachers, and university programs.

In practice, if this research can provide additional understandings of why students are chronically absent from a family perspective, then educators can identify innovative solutions to support chronically absent students and their families, which will serve to help improve student attendance. The results of this study will add to the existing body of student attendance and chronic absenteeism research, particularly at the elementary level. Emphasis will be focused on the caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance and how those perceptions impact actual student attendance.

Implications for Research

While some informative research exists about chronic absenteeism, the larger body of student attendance research has been focused on truancy (Ahmad & Miller, 2015; Dembo &

Gulledge, 2009; Garry, 1996). Since truancy research is primarily focused on older teens who are able to get themselves to school (Garry, 1996), chronic absenteeism of elementary aged students who must rely on caregivers to get them to school, is not clearly understood.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into law, in December of 2015, a requirement was mandated for every state to include in their school report cards how many students are chronically absent (Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018). ESSA also mandates that states choose five indicators to measure school performance. States could choose four academic measures and a fifth measure of school quality to measure their academic success (Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018). Thirty-six states, including the Midwest state where Smithton Elementary North is located, selected a measure of chronic absenteeism as part of their accountability. Logically, chronic absentee data is becoming increasingly available. However, the data spotlights demographic and quantitative data rather than qualitative data that could highlight perceptions of barriers to school attendance. For this reason, my study offers the research field a deeply rich portrait of chronic absenteeism that creates understandings and insights, through the voices and stories of caregivers, in ways that quantitative data cannot.

Additionally, my study is significant because it will investigate caregiver perspectives to student attendance, which impact whether or not a child is chronically absent, at the elementary school level. Investigating ways that caregivers interpret or organize sensory information produced by their own perceptions of barriers to school attendance, I can gain a better understanding of student absenteeism caused by factors outside of the school. The results of this

study will add to the existing research and knowledge of chronic absenteeism of elementary aged students by enhancing, expanding, or creating additional or new perspectives.

Theoretical Implications

Understanding caregiver perceptions of barriers to student attendance while utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, could broaden or deepen our understanding of chronic absenteeism through the study of the interrelationship between caregiver perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to school attendance. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a child's interpersonal relations within his/her microsystem is the layer that affects the child most closely. Since family and school within the child's microsystem is the closest to the child, then Bronfenbrenner's sense of nesting influences illuminate the aforementioned interrelationship study. Therefore, understanding such theoretical underpinnings could positively influence student attendance of elementary aged students who must rely on caregivers to ensure their daily attendance.

Definition of Terms

A-F report card. A document of student achievement based on this state's School Testing Program in grades three through high school.

Accountability System. Based on data to meet the mandates of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and implemented beginning with the 2002-2003 school year to ensure local education agencies are identified as to their level of performance according to the State Board of Education's system of recognition.

Caregiver perceptions. The effect that the caregiver has on the development of the child due to the caregiver's way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting his reality.

Chronic absenteeism. Missing 15 or more school days for any reason in a given academic school year (USCRDC).

Concentric structures. Two or more circles with a common center. They fit or nest inside one another and are the same distance apart all the way around, hence Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is like a nest of concentric circles, with each circle representing a particular level of the child's life.

Constructivism. An educational philosophy or theory of how social or educational phenomena develop within social contexts.

Eco Systems Theory. A leveled division of the environment with the most influential level at the center concentric circles levels with each circle representing a level or layer of a person's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Student engagement. The degree of attention, curiosity, interest, and passion that students show when they are learning.

Interrelationship. The way in which two or more things (parental perceptions and student attendance) relate to one another.

Manifestation. An action or exhibition of parents that clearly shows their perceptions within a student's attitude towards school and school attendance.

A measure of chronic absenteeism. (State) House Bill 1693 language describing one of seven indicators to be used for the 2017-2018 A-F report card accountability system.

Mentally Able Adult. A healthy, knowledgeable adult able to successfully engage in a conversation for the purposes of an interview.

Perception. The organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the presented information, or the environment.

School Engagement. The degree of attention or interest that students show at school.

Truancy. The number of unexcused absences that a student has on his/her attendance record.

Summary

While it is known that chronic absenteeism impacts student learning, it is not clearly understood (Sheldon, 2017). This qualitative case study seeks to explore and make meaning of why some students are chronically absent and others are not. More explicitly, it will explore the interrelationship of parental perceptions of the importance of student attendance and the barriers of school attendance through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Purposeful sampling will be utilized to select participants. The primary participants of the study will be parents of elementary aged children who attend one Midwest elementary school in Oklahoma. Interviews will be the primary source of data for this case study. My goal for this study is to conduct effective interviews that will yield quality data that specifically address the primary research question, how do parent perceptions of barriers to school attendance influence actual attendance at the elementary school level?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Over the past decade, chronic absence has gone from being a virtually unknown concept to a national education metric that provides every school in the nation with a critical data on how many students are missing so many days of school it jeopardizes their academic success. The inclusion of chronic absence in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was a watershed moment that made this metric an integral component of efforts to help students succeed in school and later in life.”

Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018

Chronic absenteeism is a topic that has largely been overlooked in education research (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Romero & Lee, 2007). Dembo and Gullede (2009) cited a limited number of available, empirical studies conducted to determine program effectiveness for keeping kids in school. Although districts are now required, as of the 2013-2014 school year, to report the number of students who are chronically absent to the United States Department of Education’s (USDE) Office for Civil Right (OCR), no district or state has tracked cumulative chronic absenteeism (Balfanz, 2016). Longitudinal data for the topic is virtually nonexistent. For instance, chronic absenteeism has historically been overlooked by educators and policy makers (Nauer, 2016). Many researchers, authors, and even government officials refer to chronic

absenteeism as a *hidden national crisis* (Chang, Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016) as reflected by the OCR's data report released in June of 2016. Considered a groundbreaking report, it is the first release of national data on chronic absenteeism. One of many startling findings is that 6.5 million students were chronically absent in 2014.

Common barriers exist that cause problems with empirical research: student mobility, punitive discipline policies, ineffective communication between caregivers and schools, and ineffective measurement systems (Dembo & Gullledge, 2010). Often school administrators consider student attendance to be an operational issue, like balance a budget, or a single line item in a lengthy report (Nauer, 2016), measurement and accountability had very little meaning. Student attendance measurement systems often mask the real issues. For example, a school could have an average daily attendance of 93% which appears very good since it suggests that only 7% of the student body is poor attending. However, this same school could have over 20% of its students missing 18 days or more of school per academic year (Balfanz, 2016). In a school with 1,000 students, that equates to 200 students being chronically absent rather than the suggested 7%, 70 students, being low attenders. As a result of being forced to look deeper and measure chronic absenteeism properly, key stakeholders are beginning to see the crisis and problems that have been created by high numbers of chronically absent students.

In 1998, Corville-Smith reported that, "little research" existed on programs or practices to improve student attendance. Review of the literature suggests that student attendance research gradually increased from 1998-2013 (McCluskey, C.P., Bynum, T.S., Patching, J.W. 2004;

McCray, 2006; Moinar, M. 2012). However, both student attendance research and chronic absenteeism research has sharply increased (Nauer, K. 2016, Sahin, S., Arseven, Z., & Kilec, A., 2016) since the inception of the 2013-2014 USCRDC required reporting of chronic absenteeism.

Key topics in this literature include (a) Part I: The history of chronic absenteeism and the importance of student attendance; (b) Part II: successes and failures of improving school attendance; and (c) Part III: theoretical approach and application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explore the interrelationship of caregiver perceptions and student attendance.

The History of Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism research did not begin to regularly appear in the literature until the late 70s and early 80s. During the 60s the topic was lightly peppered throughout educational journals. However, there are examples of student attendance research published as early as the 20s (Carrol, 2010). During the 60s, 70s and 80s, attention to the topic was given a professional nod but not considered a priority. It wasn't until the early 2000s that chronic absenteeism research began to appear more frequently and with a greater sense of urgency. Subsequently, an abrupt interest in chronic absenteeism information and research has developed quite recently. In fact, that interest can literally be noted on a calendar: 2014; the year that marked mandatory reporting of chronic absenteeism. Each year public schools must provide to the U.S. Civil Rights Data Collection, multiple reports that may indicate civil rights issues such as numbers of suspensions, numbers of assaults on students and school employees, numbers of incidents involving weapons, as well as the usual reports of gender, race, and ethnicity. In 2014, a new

report became required of public schools: to report the number of students who missed 15 or more days of school for the school year. Reporting of chronic absenteeism data is now annually required of every school in the nation.

Since chronic absenteeism data is now required, then the data drawn from every public school in the country could be useful to educators by providing an understanding of who is chronically absent, at what grade, and in what state. Collection of chronic absenteeism data at the federal, state, and local levels could lead to enhanced or refined programs or practices designed to encourage student attendance thus decreasing or eliminating chronic absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is more prevalent in secondary schools than in elementary schools and is a greater problem in large urban areas than in rural schools (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In a 2007 report by Romero and Lee, absenteeism rates were higher among low-income children; the lower the family income, the higher the absenteeism rate. Those students who live below the federal poverty level (FPL) have a greater risk of being chronically absent when compared to their middle-income counterparts (Romero & Lee, 2007). Race and ethnicity play a role in early absenteeism. American Indian children have the highest absenteeism rates (Romero & Lee, 2007). By fifth grade, American Indian children missed, on average, twice as many school days as their peers. The June 2016 U.S. Civil Rights Data Report brought to light several alarming results, one being that 25% of students with disabilities were chronically absent. Not only does race, ethnicity, and social economic status play a role in chronic absenteeism, but special education as well. Overall, the report unveiled a startling number of districts, nearly 500, had

chronic absenteeism rates higher than 30 percent of their entire study body (United States Civil Rights Data Report, 2016).

Importance of School Attendance

It is well understood that education is a key to success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Chang, 2010; Gottfried, 2010, 2015; Sheldon, 2007). Conversely, students who are excessively absent for any reason can all too easily get derailed when it comes to their academic success. Their high rates of absenteeism too often lead to gateways of hardships (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). For example, chronically absent students are more likely to experience incomplete schooling, low-status occupations, low earnings, unemployment, and other related employment difficulties (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). Confirming the potential hardships of chronically absent students, especially those who dropout, is a recent report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics released in 2015. It compared earnings of high school dropouts, high school graduates, and college graduates. College graduates earned close to 70 percent more income than high school graduates and 135 percent more than high school dropouts. Clearly, chronic absenteeism can translate into noteworthy disparities in wealth and income. For these reasons alone, although there are many more, reducing chronic absenteeism to improve school attendance must become a national priority.

Studies of chronic absenteeism in the early years, Pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, consistently link excessive absences to lower achievement (Gottfried, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008). For young children, chronic absenteeism can lead to both short-and-long-term consequences. For example, of the number of children who are chronically absent in

kindergarten, well over 50% of them will be chronically absent again in first grade (Romero & Lee, 2007). Their chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and/or first grade is a sobering indicator that they will be less likely to read on grade level when in 3rd grade compared to their regular attending peers (Romero & Lee, 2007).

Another example of a detrimental consequence is linked to drop-out rate. Longitudinal studies (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997), have shown that dropouts, who were chronically absent in first grade, were absent more often than their regular attending peers throughout their entire school career prior to dropping out. Longitudinally speaking, missing valuable opportunities to learn by not attending school add up over the course of a school career, and can have detrimental short and long-term effects, even when those absences begin as early as pre-kindergarten (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997).

Robert Balfanz (2016), a research professor at Johns Hopkins University, and, according to Nauer (2016), one of the field's leading researchers, "People have not really understood the magnitude of the issue" (Balfanz, 2016). Since students who are not in school have fewer opportunities for learning, chronic absenteeism can result in negative consequences for themselves as well as their schools, and communities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Additionally, it has a progressively worsened effect as students get older. For instance, students who are chronically absent in the early grades are much less likely to read on grade level by 3rd grade. Further, students who can't read at grade level by 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out when they get to high school. In fact, chronically absent students in grades 8-12 are seven times more likely to drop out of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Baltimore Education Research

Consortium, 2011) when compared to their regular-attending peers. Consequently, the possibilities of postsecondary enrollment for students with a history of chronic absenteeism are lessened (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Chronic absenteeism is easily masked, making it a problem for school staff to miss entirely. For instance, in a 2011-2012 attendance study conducted by the Center for New York City affairs, nine elementary schools were purposefully sampled. All nine schools boasted an average daily attendance rate 90% or better which appeared satisfactory and even favorable. However, upon closer examination, the 90% or better average daily attendance rates masked a dramatic chronic absenteeism problem. Of the nine schools, three of them had more than 35% of their study body absent over the course of a single academic year. Of those three schools, one of the schools had nearly half of their entire study body absent during the 2010-2011 school year (*Center for New York City Affairs study* as cited by Kim Nauer, 2016).

Kim Suttell, director of New York City Department of Education's attendance program, would like to see more administrators use student attendance as a more prominent measure in school accountability. She argues that if principals track and analyze student attendance they may find it useful for predicting how a child might do academically. Consequently, tracking and analyzing student attendance could become a valuable tool for school improvement (Nauer, 2016). "If too many students miss too much school, the entire school will suffer," says Suttell (Nauer, 2016). Can a school maintain achievement momentum when a large percentage of its students are chronically absent? When educators move beyond the mere reporting of numbers

and become convinced that studying and analyzing chronic absenteeism is worthy of their time, getting kids to come to school more could become a reality (Nauer, 2016).

While the evidence of a relationship between school attendance and academic achievement is well documented (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Balfanz, 2016), parent involvement literature suggests that the most salient influences on student outcomes are parent expectations (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Pellerin, 2005; Sheldon, 1997); thus impacting the value that the family places on school attendance.

Although student attendance has been formally monitored for years at the local, state, and national levels, chronic absenteeism has not (Balfanz, 2016). In fact, student attendance rates are deceptive. For instance, a school may have a 94% attendance rate yet hidden within those numbers is a 78% chronic absenteeism rate. How can that be? On any given day during the school year, a school may have 94% of its students in attendance; however, of the 6% who are not there several, if not all, could be students who are chronically absent.

Over 6 million students in the U.S. were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 academic school year. Mathematically, that equates to one in seven students or nearly 15%. The numbers are alarming and are no longer concealed. The *hidden crisis*, as referenced by the United States Department of Education Civic Rights Data Report, is fully exposed. Since all schools in the nation are required to report chronic absenteeism, as of the 2017-2018 school year, I speculate that these statistics may become even more disturbing in our near future.

Through personal observation in my role as an administrator, I have come to recognize that some families of elementary aged students demonstrate successful attendance while others

do not. One reason for this anomaly could be that some parents are more engaged with their child's schooling experiences than others. Another reason could be that some parents perceive themselves to have more challenging barriers to attendance than others. My research could help educators and policy makers increase their understanding of what families perceive to be barriers to school attendance. If that understanding is increased, there are greater opportunities for schools to create policies or school culture to support families of chronically absent children.

Successes and Failures

The literature suggests that some schools are successful with decreasing chronic absenteeism and others are not (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Sometimes, schools and/or communities launch initiatives to improve student attendance. The literature reflects that there is not one single best practice that will be the cure-all for eliminating chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein). Instead, the literature suggests that holistic approaches which address school factors, family factors, community factors, and unforeseen out-of-school factors, could be used to improve student attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Just as important as learning what works to keep kids in school, is learning from failed strategies that didn't work to keep kids in school.

Also suggested in the literature is that the school systems, community systems, and government systems that use punitive responses to absenteeism for effectiveness rethink their practices. One example of an organization that explored punitive responses to absenteeism is *A Center for American Progress* (www.americanprogress.org). In 2015, *A Center for American Progress*, released a report that explored punitive responses to absenteeism. Their report is an important and relevant example of a system re-thinking punitive practices. The report challenges

school districts or school boards to review their zero-tolerance policies that require school officials to suspend or expel certain students engaged in zero-tolerance behaviors (Chang & Romero, 2008). Multiple days of suspension often result in the student being chronically absent; therefore, some policies exist that actually exacerbate the problem. Such policies districts may find worth re-examining. Juvenile Justice system literature points to court systems that are intended to improve attendance results re-think their current practices in order to ascertain whether or not the system is resulting in the actual desired outcome. (Hoyles, 1998).

As previously stated, chronic absenteeism often leads to truancy, and sometimes chronically absent students are also truant students. Both are warning signs for educational failure (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). In turn, educational failure is one route to the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is noteworthy to this study because it refers to policies and/or practices that include zero-tolerance discipline policies, truancy tickets, and court involvement, to name just a few, for particular school offenses (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). School, legislative, and community stakeholders who are responsible for making attendance and truancy policies are faced with challenges that must meet the both the law and uphold school policy. When systems such as the above-mentioned re-think punitive practices, some literature (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012) suggests that chronically absent students could get back on track and become regular attenders.

Juvenile Justice System

In some cities, classroom absentee rates can climb as high as 30 percent (Garry, 1996). In our nation's largest school system, New York City, about 150,000 students out of 1 million are

absent on a typical day. Three-fourths of students in New York City, who became involved with the juvenile justice system, had histories of chronic absenteeism. While schools are concerned with chronic absenteeism and its effects on student achievement, the juvenile justice system is concerned with truancy and its effects on our communities. Many truant students, though not all, are chronically absent and many chronically absent students, though not all, are truant. Truancy and chronic absenteeism are related terms but should not be used interchangeably, because each represents a certain type of absence. However, both can result in a variety of negative outcomes such as not completing high school or becoming part of the juvenile justice system prior to exiting high-school.

Truancy typically refers to the number of unexcused absences that a student has on his/her attendance record. In like manner, chronic absenteeism refers to the number of all absences both excused and unexcused. Truancy laws vary from district to district and state to state. In the state of Oklahoma, four unexcused absences in a four week time period amount to truancy (Oklahoma State Statute, 70 O.S.§ 10-105): If a child is absent without valid excuse four (4) or more days or parts of day within a four-week period or is absent without valid excuse for ten (10) or more days or parts of days within a semester, the attendance officer shall notify the parent, guardian or custodian of the child and immediately report such absences to the district attorney in the county wherein the school is located for juvenile proceedings pursuant to Title 10A of Oklahoma Statutes.

In contrast, the definition of truancy in California is considered, “a student missing more than 30 minutes of instruction without an excuse three times during the school year” (Ahmad &

Miller, 2015). Chronic absenteeism not only includes unexcused absences, but excused absences as well. “Chronic absenteeism is the most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior,” concludes a report compiled by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (Garry, 1996).

When a chronically absent student becomes truant and that truancy turns into delinquent behavior, a lifetime of adverse effects come into play: unemployment, crime, drug abuse, gang membership, and incarceration to name just a few. Truancy is costly. It costs students an education and costs communities financially. Districts dependent on state aid measured by daily attendance figures stand to lose tens of thousands of dollars annually due to chronic absenteeism and truancy. “Parents must be involved and held responsible for their children’s school attendance,” (Garry, 1996).

Healthcare Systems

Health research links chronically absent youth to increased childhood health conditions such as allergies, asthma, diabetes, and obesity. Grant and Brito (2010) also linked chronic absenteeism to chronic mental health conditions, anxiety, and even attention deficit disorder. Conversely, chronic health conditions contribute to chronic absenteeism (Van Cleave, Gortmaker, and Perrin, 2010). A report by the National Center for Children in Poverty posited that students who were identified as children living in poverty and with poor health were 200-300% more likely to be chronically absent than their peers who were considered to be of average health and to be from families of average income (Chang and Romero, 2008).

National, State, and Local Level Attendance Overview

National Level Student Attendance

According to 2015-2016 data from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are 132,853 K-12 public schools in the United States. Of those, 88,665 are elementary schools. In like fashion, Civil Rights Data Collection, reports over 7 million students in the U.S. missed 15 or more days of school during the 2015-2016 school year. That's about 16 percent of the student population, or about 1 in 6 students out of a population of 50.8 million students (CRDC, 2016). While we know that chronic absenteeism occurs at every grade level, the 2015-2016 CRDC data, suggests that the highest rate of chronic absenteeism is at the high school level with one in five students being chronically absent and the lowest rate is at the elementary level with around 14% of elementary students missing 15 or more days a year.

State Level Student Attendance

“The Oklahoma School Report Card is a *multi-measures* model of school **improvement and performance**” (OSDE/Oklahoma School Report Cards), is growth centered, and relies upon school quality indicators such as chronic absenteeism at both the primary and secondary levels...” (OSRC, 2018). Further, as reported by OSDE, research links excessive absences to diminished academic outcomes, specifically citing that even excused absences, “represent lost instruction time that can put a student at risk of falling behind academically.”

As attested by the State Department of Education in Oklahoma, student attendance data from its 2018-2019 Oklahoma School Report Card, are in congruence with national student attendance data. On the authority of OSDE, the state school report card denotes 86% of its

students state wide are in good attendance; subsequently, 14% of its students are chronically absent. The national average is sixteen percent.

Since each district in the state of Oklahoma must report chronic absenteeism data as required by the USCRDC, many districts and schools, like Smithton Elementary North, are bringing to the forefront the importance of student attendance (Nauer, 2016). Smithton Elementary North, the site of this study, uses a *measure of chronic absenteeism* as part of their State Report Card for end-of-year accountability purposes. In fact, the banner guiding principle for accountability goals for the state of Oklahoma is, “all students can grow and all schools can improve” (OSRC, 2018); thus linking student attendance to a cycle of *continuous improvement for schools*.

Figure 2. Oklahoma School Report Card (2019)

ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL INDICATORS

90 POSSIBLE POINTS

	ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT	35
	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	15
	MATHEMATICS	15
	SCIENCE	5
	ACADEMIC GROWTH	30
	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	15
	MATHEMATICS	15
	ELPA PROGRESS	15
	CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM	10

Local Level Student Attendance

In the state of Oklahoma, 965 of its 1,789 traditional schools are elementary, (OSDE Fast Facts, January 2020). Smithton Elementary North is one of them. During the 2018-2019 school year, Smithton Elementary North had a student enrollment of around 350 students (OSRC, 2019) which parallels with national (NCES, 2016) data of comparable rural schools that average 358 students. In contrast, the average public school enrollment size in the U.S. is 528 students.

Regarding attendance, Smithton Elementary School reports that 8% of their student body is *not in good attendance* or chronically absent. In like fashion, the district itself reports that 8%

of its entire student body, which is well over one hundred students, is chronically absent (OSDE, 2019).

Application of Theory

Young children depend on their families to ensure their daily attendance at school. In general, parental perceptions, attitudes, and perspectives towards the importance of school attendance and barriers to school attendance may formulate an important and extensive aspect of our understanding chronic absenteeism. The following review of literature builds an argument that elementary aged students' school attendance is interrelated with parental perceptions of barriers to student attendance and parental perceptions of their own engagement with their child's education.

Proposed Theoretical Approach for Study

Theories are conceived and studied in order to explain, predict, and understand phenomena and sometimes to extend our current understandings of a specific content area (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, creating a scholarly framework that clearly defines the research problem (Merriam, 1998) is of the essence. Research questions help define the research problem. These same research questions to be answered are technically known as the theoretical framework (Merriam, 1998) of the study. The theoretical framework will anchor the study and serve as a lens through which the research questions will be explored.

In order to determine which theoretical framework was the best fit for this case study, I identified three of the most influential sociocultural theorists of child development: Jean Piaget,

Lev Vygotsky, and Urie Bronfenbrenner. I sought to identify which theorist proposed a theory that would best fit the exploration of caregiver perceptions of barriers to attendance and its interrelationship with caregiver perceptions of engagement with their child's education. While each of the three theorists recognizes the surroundings of a child, whether it be contextual, cultural, or familial, as significant to the child's development, it is Urie Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Systems Theory that aligns itself most closely with the research questions that I want to explore.

Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-born, American, child developmental psychologist, proposed a different type of child development model (1979) to explain how everything in the child's environment affects how the child grows and develops. He posited child development is affected by factors within the child and factors within his surrounding world, such as his family, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's theory specifically addresses the family as the child's *society* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It explains how the fundamental, built-in qualities of a child and his environment interact to influence or determine how he will grow and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Essentially, the child's society is his surroundings such as family, school, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Since elementary aged children are completely reliant on their parents to ensure their school attendance, then understanding the home ecological system of the parent-child relationship will help us better understand children's school attendance based on their parents' belief systems about schools, attitudes towards school, and perceptions of barriers to school attendance.

At the core of his theory, known as the Ecological Systems Theory, is the developing child and the child's interaction with family, environment, and school. Instead of linear, stair-step type phases of development like Piaget's model, Bronfenbrenner's theory is made up of *nested arrangements of concentric structures* that label all of the different aspects of a child's environment as a set of nest-like systems arrayed as the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem (see figure 3). It is amongst these patterns of activities, perceptions, attitudes, and perspectives towards school attendance, that formulate an extensive aspect of understanding the interrelationship of parental perceptions and student attendance.

As this study seeks to uncover potential, hidden, parental perceptions stories, the application of Bronfenbrenner's theory will guide and support it with an appropriate theoretical lens. Understanding the perceptions of a child's environment, inclusive of family and parents, provides theoretical support for the idea of parental perceptions affecting student attendance (Tekin, 2014).

Further, Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Theory (1979) is the, "interaction of structures within a layer and interactions of structures between layers." It elucidates how the inherent qualities of a child grow and develop within multiple contexts such as family and school. Additionally, it establishes the interrelationship of parental perceptions of barriers to student attendance and parent perceptions of their own personal involvement with their child's education. Since elementary aged children are completely reliant upon their parents to ensure their school attendance, then understanding the home ecological system of the parent-child relationship will help us better understand children's school attendance based on their parents'

belief systems about schools, attitudes towards school, and perceptions of barriers to school attendance.

One more important aspect of Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Theory is the way that relationships have impact in two directions, which he calls *bi-directional* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the microsystem, the layer closest to the child, are the structures with which the child has direct contact such as family, school, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem encompasses these relationships and interactions (Berk, 2000) which have the most direct contact with the child. It is at this microsystem level, or nest, that Bronfenbrenner explains bi-directional influences.

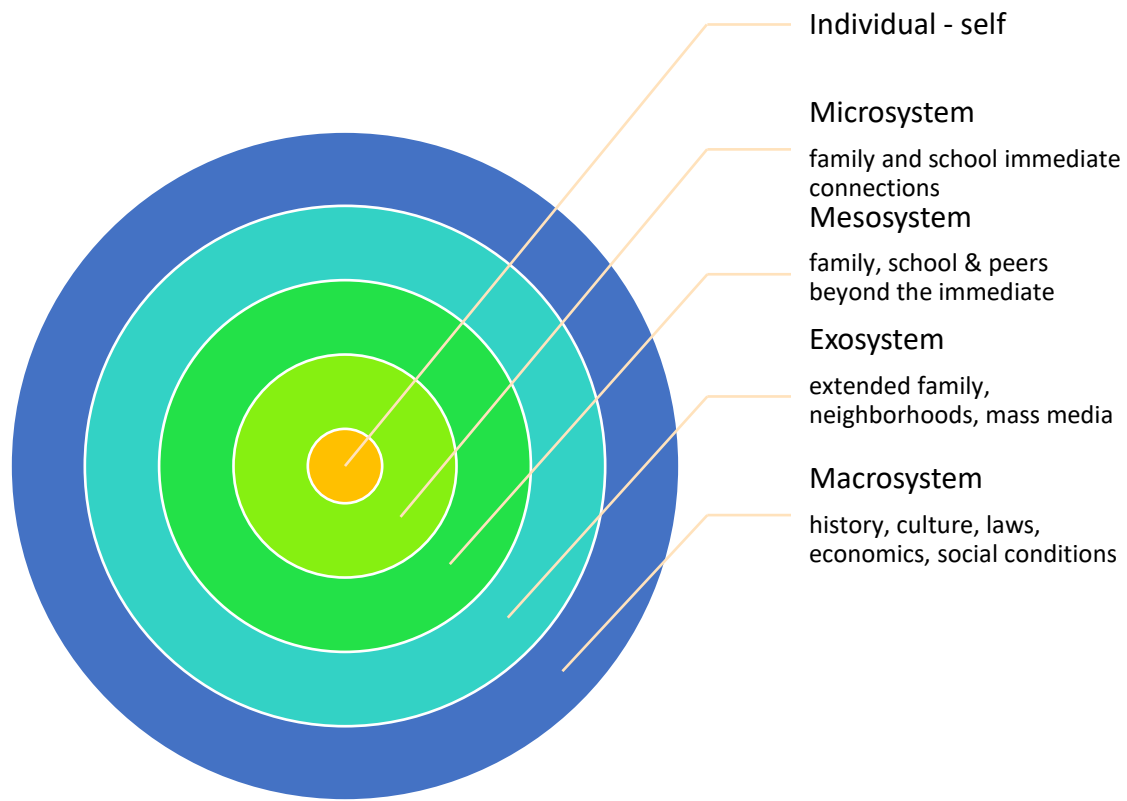
One influence is away from the child and the other influence is toward the child. Likewise, the influence is reciprocal for both parent and child. This simply means that a child's parents may affect his beliefs and behaviors while on the other hand, the child affects the beliefs and behaviors of the parent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bi-directional influences occur at all levels within the nested system. But more importantly, bi-directional influences occur *within* a layer of the structure and *between* the layers of structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); thus contributing to a nested effect. Although interactions at the outer layers do have impact on the child, the bi-directional influences are strongest and have the greatest impact on the child at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

How parents perceive their own engagement or disengagement with their child's school is exerted as "certain parental socialization styles" (Baumrind 1967, 1978, 1991; Maccoby and Martin 1983). Contained within this particular socialization style is a parent's belief system

regarding the importance, or lack thereof, of school attendance. As described above, the parental belief system directly influences the child at the microsystem level. For instance, it is a known factor that when parents are actively involved and engaged with school, they positively influence their children's beliefs, attitudes, and values placed on education (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, Pellerin, 2005, Van Acker & Wheby, 2000). One such value is student attendance which is bi-directional at the microsystem level.

Child development is affected by factors within the child and factors from the child's surrounding world, such as his/her family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the microsystem, patterns of behavior, individual values, parent-child relationships, and even parent-school relationships coincide; thus, they illuminate the interrelationship of parental perceptions of barriers to school attendance and their own perceptions of their involvement with their child's education. Interwoven in this study will be rich, illustrative portraits of student attendance and parent perceptions of barrier to student attendance that could help explain the attendance patterns of children with high attendance or low attendance. For example, views from parents that describe barriers to school attendance or suggestions as to what encourages parents to engage in their children's education, could be an integral part of a complex tapestry enumerating our understanding of chronic absenteeism.

Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Summary

Chronic absenteeism is a hidden national crisis. Rather than an isolated incident, it is an alarming social condition representative of a larger context that takes into consideration the individual, the family, the school, and systems of society. Chronic absenteeism is a frequent and recurring event with serious side effects (Balfanz, 2016), which negatively impacts academic achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge (Romero & Lee, 2007). If children are not

in school, the odds of their academic success is reduced. Data is clear that academic achievement cannot be gained when students are chronically absent. Emerging data on absenteeism suggests that we need to re-examine and critically analyze what has and has not worked to increase attendance. If one of our core goals of education is to close the achievement gap then we must ensure that not only high-poverty students and communities of color get to school every day and on time in all grades Pre-kindergarten through 12th (Balfanz, 2016); but we must ensure that *all* children get to school every day and on time. With strategic efforts, educators, families, and policy makers can do something about this epidemic.

In conclusion this study will explore the interrelationships of parental perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to school attendance so that our knowledge base can be extended, additional insights can be provided to key stakeholders who make student attendance policy decisions, and current literature can be expanded.

Chapter Two provides a detailed review of the literature regarding the importance of school attendance, absenteeism, chronic absenteeism, and consequences of chronic absenteeism. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology utilized for this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to explore the interrelationship of caregiver perceptions of the importance of student attendance, perceived barriers to school attendance, and actual attendance practices. Caregivers of elementary aged students were the primary participants. As the primary researcher, I relied mostly on data from observations and interviews that was conducted over a period of time equivalent to a calendar year. Artifacts and documents provided ancillary and supporting data. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990, 2002) based on a given set of criteria was used to identify participants for open-ended interview questions. These criteria are discussed in more detail below. Finally, an in-depth and extensive data analysis was conducted following a constant comparative method.

Statement of Problem

School attendance has become a national priority largely due to findings in the literature regarding the relationship between student attendance and student success in school (Chang,

Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Specifically, research suggests that a child's attendance record may be the biggest factor influencing his/her academic success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Child's & Lofton, 2021, Gottfried, 2014, Pellerin, 2005; Sheldon, 1997). However, while school attendance may be a national priority, as indicated by the USCRDC, some schools are successful with increasing student attendance and others are not (USDCCR, 2016). For example, for the 2013- 2014 school year, approximately 500 school districts reported that 30% or more of their student body was chronically absent thus demonstrating the large number of schools and districts that are not successful with school attendance (United States Department of Civil Rights, 2016).

One reason for this anomaly may be explained in terms of family perceptions regarding the value of school attendance and our own lack of understanding of barriers to attendance as families perceive and experience this. Additionally, findings in the literature suggest that children whose families are engaged in their education, experience higher attendance rates than those whose caregivers are not engaged (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2015). However, little is known about how families perceive barriers to school attendance.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was utilized in this study to explain the interrelationship of family and caregiver perceptions regarding the importance of attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance at the elementary level (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2015; Pellerin, 2005; Van Acker & Wheby, 2000).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to explore family perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to their children's school attendance.

Research Questions

Research questions for this study:

How are family perceptions regarding attendance/barriers to attendance and actual student attendance interrelated?

1. What are family perceptions of the importance of the importance of their child's attendance at school?
2. Do perceptions regarding the importance of attendance differ between families of high attending students and low attending students? If so, how?
3. What are family perceptions of barriers to their children's attendance?
4. How does Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explain the interrelationship between family perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to attendance and actual attendance at school?

When choosing a study design, I looked for a good match between the type of research that I wanted to conduct and my own skills and attributes as a researcher (Merriam, 1999). Before getting started on my research project I examined my own bent or orientation about the way I perceive reality, identified my purpose for doing this research, and determined the type of

knowledge that I hoped could be produced through the efforts of my research (Merriam, 1998). Once those topics were addressed, it became clear that qualitative inquiry in the form of case study was the ideal inquiry design to study the interrelationship of parent perceptions of the importance of school attendance and parent perceptions of barriers to attendance.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative inquiry is naturally appealing to me, but more importantly, it is the type of inquiry that was the best fit for my study. Qualitative inquiry focuses on meaning in context (Merriam, 1998). Interviewing, observing, and analyzing are central to qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 1998). Since the human is the primary research tool and primary data collection instrument in qualitative research, then the qualitative inquiry can pick up on subtleties, nuances, and underlying meaning (Merriam, 1998) in ways that quantitative research cannot. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in understanding the perceptions of other people and understanding the meaning of how my participants make sense of their world based on their experiences. Subsequently, a qualitative research case-study design was the best fit for my research. With it are many strengths and admittedly a few limitations which will be discussed.

Case Study

A case study design allowed me to dig deep, record details, explore new or emerging ideas, and bring together what seemed like unrelated circumstances. When combined, the details found from digging deep and the exploration of new or emerging ideas, formed a rich and thick tapestry of a single phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). An added benefit of the qualitative design that I selected for this study, was the flexibility that it allowed me, as the researcher, to follow

through with emergent data even after I started the data collection (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993; Merriam, 1998). Additionally, studying information-rich cases in depth and with great detail provided for deeper understandings of this case rather than a generalization from a sample to a population (Patton, 2002).

Case study characteristics. Case study, as described by Merriam (1998), has as its single most defining characteristic, the ability or the allowance to delimit the object of the study, the case.

With this in mind, the case can be a thing, a unit, a person, or a single entity that is the heart of the focus with certain types of boundaries that fence in the study (Merriam, 1998. P. 27). Boundaries could be time, such as a single school year, or the number of people who can be interviewed in a given situation. For instance, if a researcher wanted to study the case of a first-year teacher, he would have to limit the number of teachers interviewed because he could not possibly interview every first-year teacher in the nation. Merriam (1998) also suggests that a case might be selected because it is an instance of a new concern, like chronic absenteeism, or an old issue getting attention for the first time like the difference between average daily attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Another thing that sets case study apart from other types of research is the data collection and data analysis methods (Merriam, 1998). Experimental research requires very specific ways of collecting and analyzing data. Though case-study research has thoughtful and intentional steps, it is not a rigid set of prescriptive steps like experimental research (Merriam, 1998). Finally, and I think most importantly, the decision for the researcher to select case-study is that

the design allows the researcher opportunities to explore, discover, interpret, and apply insight while focusing on a single phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

Emic view of case study. For this study, I needed an objective approach that provided me with a view from the inside. The insider's perspective was the one I sought because it came from within the culture where the project was situated (Murchison, 2010). The insider's perspectives came from the values, opinions, insights, and perspectives of caregivers of elementary aged children who could speak directly from the culture of caregivers who were part of this study. They were part of the population of the small, rural community where the study was situated. It was under these circumstances that I chose to apply an emic view (Merriam, 1998; Murchison, 2010, Patton, 2002). Since this case study was done from an emic perspective, it allowed my research to include more detail and culturally rich information about the practices and beliefs of the caregivers who were interviewed.

Methodological Procedures

Population

Smithton Elementary North sits against a backdrop of blue skies, prairie land, and grazing cattle which covers 199 square miles in the district. From the west end of the playground can be seen the city's largest employer, *Newton Manufacturing International*, a 30-acre manufacturing plant that provides over 1,300 jobs for families in and around the school community.

Smithton Elementary North is a Title One school with 57.2% of its student body qualifying for free or reduced lunches. Ethnic makeup, based on the 2017 Office of Educational

and Quality Report, is 77.8% Caucasian, 9.4% Native American, 5.7 % Hispanic, 2.5% Black on 1.3% Asian. From a district population of 6,678 citizens, and an average household income of slightly above \$65,000, almost half of adults aged 25 or over have either a high school diploma (33.9%) or no high school diploma (12.5%). Those holding a Bachelor's degree or above are 26.5% of the total district population of adults age 25 and older.

Parental Support 2017 data shows a 60% participation rate in parent-teacher conferences. On average, caregivers volunteer at Smithton about 46 minutes per year per student. Nearly 41% of Smithton's Kindergarten through 3rd graders receive reading remediation compared to the state average of 37.9%. Mobility rate is 5.5% of incoming students compared to the state's 10%.

Smithton's suspension rate is 1 suspension, of 10 days or less, for every 56.7 students which is significantly lower than the state suspension rate of 1 suspension for every 15.4 students. Suspension rate for students who are suspended ten or more days is zero. Based on a 175 school day calendar, on average, each student is absent 7.7 days a school year which is slightly below the state average of 9.6 school days per year.

Based on this demographic data, Smithton Elementary North met criteria for this study. It was an elementary school of any PK-6 combination with a minimum student enrollment number of at least 250, and had an adequate sample pool of caregivers, of whom I interviewed. Those interviewed had either a low attending or high attending elementary-aged student. The above criteria were important because the target population of this study was caregivers of elementary-aged students and the pool had to be large enough to secure participants for interviews. Further, since the child was at the center of the study, when applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems theory, the criteria allowed for opportunities to gain perspectives of the child's microsystem at school and with his caregiver.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select respondents from Smithton Elementary North on the basis of what they could contribute to my understanding (Merriam, 1998) of family perceptions of barriers to student attendance and family perceptions of the importance of school attendance. Although my study involved certain types of events to observe such as morning parent-drop off and front office observations of the attendance clerk, a larger portion relied on interview data from the selected respondents. For this reason, I identified a highly knowledgeable key person (Merriam, 1998) who knew the most about student attendance at Smithton Elementary North during the 2018-2019 academic school year. For this research case, the highly knowledgeable person was the school principal.

The principal provided me with a list of twenty caregiver names who had high attending students and a list of twenty caregiver names who had low attending students. High attending students were those students who have been absent, for any reason, less than two times for the previous semester and no more than four times for the entire school year. Low attending students were defined as those missing ten or more school days the previous semester or eighteen or more school days the previous school year. The principal also provided me with caregiver contact information in the form of emails and phone numbers.

An Invitation to Participate letter was composed and emailed to the forty caregivers. If they chose to participate, they responded directly to the initial email. I chose email as the type of

communication protocol because it allowed each caregiver to be completely anonymous without the principal's knowledge of who was participating. Protecting the privacy of the participants was always an ethical concern and one of which I contended during each step of this research study (Merriam, 1998).

As Merriam described in her book (1998), I conducted a "preliminary exploration that led to identifying key informants." The preliminary exploration was accomplished with a simple three to four question screening tool. For instance, I asked caregivers if they would be willing to be interviewed regarding their experiences with their children's school and attendance. If they were willing, I asked about their availability to determine whether or not the interview could be conducted within the particular time-frame that I provided. The time frame was precisely determined once I receive IRB approval to begin research.

Based on the results of the screening, I identified six caregivers who had high attending students and six caregivers who had low attending students. This allowed me to begin with a set of twelve caregivers to interview, with an implicit understanding that some caregivers may choose not to participate later in the process. If that were to happen, which it did not, I would still have enough participants to highly satisfy the data for which I was seeking.

Upon selection of the twelve caregivers, interviews were conducted using an open-ended interview protocol (see appendix B). The interviews were the primary source of data for this case study. Respondents were assured protection of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (Merriam, 1998). Protecting the privacy of the participants was and still is of utmost importance

and a high-priority ethical concern which I managed and keep in the forefront of my mind every step of the way (Merriam, 1998) throughout the study.

Criteria for Selected Participants

In this study, I sought caregivers based on a given set of criteria. They must:

- have at least one elementary aged child in kindergarten through sixth grade who was either a high attender or low attender
- reside in the district of the selected school
- be a healthy, mentally-able adult aged 20-60
- be willing to participate in an in-person interview.

Data Collection

Interviews. Interviews are data collection tools (Merriam, 1998). As the primary researcher, I sought to conduct effective interviews that yielded quality data that would specifically address the research questions. Interviewing techniques used for this case study followed Merriam's (1998) guide for researchers: ask good questions, use varying types of questions, know which type of questions to avoid, and know how to probe throughout the interview when necessary. Additionally, as the researcher was mindful of interactions between me and the participant.

An *Invitation to Participate* letter was composed and then emailed to those forty caregivers as described above. The Invitation to Participate letter outlined the basic tenets of the study, but it did not identify any of the caregivers as one of either a low attending or high attending student. Those who choose to participate responded directly to me and not the

principal in order to create a further layer of anonymity so that the principal did not know which caregivers responded and which ones did not. This protocol also helped mitigate any potential fear a caregiver may have of negative recourse from school staff.

Unfortunately, the response to the initial email was very low. Although every participant had an email address, it is unknown if all had access to email during this point in the study. Only three caregivers responded. Therefore, I re-sent the email to all of the potential participants. The second email attempt was not at all successful; therefore, I had to determine a new method of contact. I decided to use their cell phone numbers and send a text message. Of course, the initial text message was much shorter than the email though it contained the same basic information and went something like this:

Hi. This is Andrea Rains. I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University who is studying school attendance of elementary aged students. You were identified as someone who might be interested in participating in this study. Your unique perspective is valued and desired. If you are willing to participate or want further information, please respond to this text message.

To my pleasant surprise, the text message communication was very successful. I was able to secure the twelve participants for whom I sought. Once I learned of a caregiver's interest, I verified their best method of communication and sent them a formal *Invitation to Participate* letter. From this point forward, phone calls or text messaging became the prominent tool of communication prior to the in-person interview.

Once I secured an interview time, I prepared all of the materials needed for the interview: hard copies of the questions for my personal reference, pencils, and a digital recording device.

During each interview, I used an open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix C). I engaged the interviewee in the most important part of the research: data collection through interviews since interviews were the primary source of data for this case study. Respondents were assured protection of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (Merriam, 1998).

Although all twelve interviews were originally scheduled as in-person, ten were conducted in person and two were conducted on the phone. The two phone interviews were due to unforeseen circumstances experienced by the two participants. I was grateful for their willingness to re-schedule and participate via phone. While I didn't have the luxury of noting subtle nuances that are normally seen in an in-person interview, I felt that the phone interviews yielded just as much quality data as the in-person interviews.

Upon agreement and completion of the adult consent form, the participants were asked research questions while a digital device, either my personal I-phone or I-pad, recorded the entire interview. The interview was designed to last no longer than ninety minutes although most lasted anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes. I want to note here that the two phone interview participants completed the adult consent form prior to the phone interviews. Both requested that the forms be mailed to them via US postal service. I honored their request and included a self-addressed stamped envelope for their convenience to mail it back to me. To my delight, both did so in a timely manner.

Observations. Observations in their natural settings were another source of data. Observations were made in the school parking lot and in the school's main office during pick up

and drop off times. Once the observation data was collected, it was added to the caregiver interview data then both were combined and added to the data from the literature review.

As the data from the above noted sources were compiled, the sorting process began. First, I looked for broad themes or generalizations pausing frequently for reflection in an effort to determine whether or not the data led to more questions or a new thought. Next, I began to identify themes, ideas, or recurring patterns. My analysis moved from broad to narrow. Devising themes, as suggested by the literature, led to conceiving categories (Merriam, 1998). Basically, that data went through a complete decomposition process in order to meaningfully recombine it into themed categories so that it reflected the purpose of the research and clearly answered the research questions.

Documents and Artifacts

Conducting interviews, collecting data, and participating in data analysis throughout the study was coupled with document gathering and assembly of artifacts; all of which occurred over a period of time during the 2018-2019 school year and the 2019-2020 school year. For the purposes of this study, it is important to know that all interviews were completed prior to January, 2020.

Document gathering was vital to my study because it served as a substitute for records of activity that I was unable to directly observe (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). For example, documents such as state and district attendance reports provided a history that allowed me to study trends in attendance. Attendance reports also allowed me to compare attendance rates among schools as well as compare other demographic data. All of the reports were retrievable

online through the state department website or from the school district's website. Even city and state truancy statutes fell into this category. However, it was the more personalized documents, such as phone call logs or memos from the school, that I obtained from either the principal or a caregiver. Artifacts that I collected were notes home to parents, newspaper articles, attendance clerk logs of phone calls, and notes from my personal observations.

Since this was a qualitative case study, I wanted to explore every possible avenue that could potentially lead to a finding. Integrating all of the above referenced materials, artifacts, and documents allowed me to explore those avenues. Further, the artifacts and documents collected were directly related to my research question. They supported and assisted in demonstrating how the phenomena of barriers to school attendance and caregiver perceptions of the importance of attendance manifests itself in the lives of the families, the children, and the school.

Data from these reports added to my demographic understanding of the families who represented Smithton Elementary North. My logic suggested that if I better understood family demographics, then I would gain a deeper understanding of caregiver perceptions of attendance and barriers to attendance. At the same time, these kinds of documents aided in creating a seamless flow of narrative since they were key pieces of information that helped fill in gaps where other data lacked.

Data Analysis

I was the primary researcher, which meant that I was also the primary data collection instrument (Merriam, 1998). My goal was to conduct effective interviews that yielded quality data that specifically addressed the research questions. Such research questions should summon

the heart of data analysis which is “the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, as cited in Merriam, 1998).

Interviewing techniques used for this case study followed Merriam’s (1998) guide for researchers: ask good questions, use varying types of questions, know which type of questions to avoid, know how to begin the interview and know how to probe throughout the interview when necessary. Once I arrived at the interview, I needed to be mindful of interactions between me as the researcher and the participant. It was imperative that I was respectful and nonjudgmental during the interview and that I communicated with the participant in a nonthreatening manner. Any other manner could have impeded the gathering of quality data needed for my study. Navigating the interview in a manner that didn’t create a *me vs. them* or *insider vs. outsider* feeling (Merriam, 1998) or sentiment was critical to maintaining the pureness of the data collected. I did not want my data tainted due to an interview-interviewee relationship that felt out of balance due to gender, race, age or a skewed perception of any other type of group identity (Merriam, 1998).

Foundationally, first-person accounts of parental experiences with their child’s holistic educational experience is their personal account of how they experience the school world of their child’s education. Since school attendance was the heart of the study it was also the heart of where the most data was collected and analyzed. Narrative stories told by families were paramount to having substantial and authentic data. Consequently, I approached the entire human-to-human experience with sensitivity as well as neutrality (Merriam, 1998).

First-person accounts of parents' experiences with their children's education and their perceptions of barriers to school attendance was the primary source of data. Analyzing this type of data required sensitivity to the stories told by families as well as neutrality on the part of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). If I waited until the end of data collection to begin analyzing, then I had undermined my project (Merriam, 1998). To avoid this trap, data collection from interviews and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). In fact, certain steps of the process were so indistinct that the data was indistinguishable from the data analysis (Thorne, 2000). When this happened, I was intentional about how to process or place the data.

In effect, I quickly realized during the first interview that new thoughts and new questions occurred in my mind while listening to the participant. At the same time, the participant would say something surprising or something that I wanted to know more about. Consequently, I decided to take notes during the interview since I didn't want to interrupt the interviewee. I found it helpful to make notes on a copy of the interview questions so that I knew exactly when those new thoughts or questions occurred during the interview.

Once the interview was completed I transcribed it. Upon completion of the transcription I read the entire transcript as a first reading without pausing or making notes though it was natural to simultaneously tuck away mental notes. I chose to do this so that I could get a feel for the lay of the land so to speak. It was during the second reading that I began making physical notes, writing short memos on sticky notes, making comments in the margins, highlighting text and asking even more questions (Merriam, 1998). During the readings and note takings and

highlighting I was continuously reflecting. Pausing for reflection was the point where tentative themes seemed to surface.

From the reflections, I began to capture tentative themes, ideas, or recurring patterns (Merriam, 1998). Noteworthy at this juncture was the recognition that the process of data analysis is highly intuitive (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers may have an insight during their data analysis process without being able to fully explain where the insight came from. However, good qualitative researchers know not to dismiss that insight, rather make note of it because it could later become a finding (Merriam, 1998).

Merriam's methodology immerses the researcher into data collection and the data analysis process simultaneously. Again – this approach was a highly desirable approach to my research design since my design heavily relied on interviews as the main source of data. Merriam's methodology also described the different levels of analysis that was important to this study. For this reason, devising themes or conceiving categories indicated by the data (Merriam, 1998) were specific parts of the map or design for meaningfully decomposing then re-composing the data to reflect the purpose of the research and to clearly answer the research questions. To devise themes and conceive categories coding played a key role. With equal importance, my utilization of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory served as an overlay or wrap-around of the data that supported refinement of the final analysis of the data.

Coding and Themes

To immerse myself in the data was to repeatedly read data in an ever-seeking manner of searching for patterns and meanings (Nowell et al, 2017) as well as categories and themes

(Merriam, 1998). Once I had familiarized myself with the data, I began the initial process of coding. In phase one of coding, I focused on specific characteristics of the data in effort to sort and simplify the data with the main goal of attaining clarity in what constituted the boundaries of each code.

During the coding process, themes began to emerge. Although some researchers may find it useful to use a software system or even a digital system such as excel that is coded ahead of time by the researcher, I did not. Instead, I found a paper-pencil system was most useful. I did this by using white 3x5 index cards, highlighters, colored pens, paper clips, scissors, and scotch tape. Although data sorting tools like this may appear basic and simple at first blush, they actually aided in a data analysis process that eventually became very sophisticated. To illustrate, I used scissors to cut multiple phrases or words from interview transcripts, particular data from state reports, and noteworthy segments of written text from the observations. This type of sorting and coding system enabled me to easily manipulate individual pieces of data by moving them in and around other pieces of the data until each piece was carefully nested or tied to other like pieces of data. Early into the sorting and coding process, the data pieces were color coded and sorted into broad categories. For instance, any piece of data that addressed parent perceptions of the number of school days missed per month was coded with a blue marker and sorted into the broad category of *school days missed*.

In similar fashion, the coding and sorting process continued and narrowed as natural themes began to emerge. These naturally emerging themes transitioned the data analysis process into the next phase of bringing together similar or like fragments or components of coded data,

and turn them into recognizable themes (Merriam, 1998). In particular, I searched for essential themes or significant concepts that would link the data to the research questions. Also, I sought to identify themes which were the most relevant to building an understanding of the interrelationship of caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance and actual school attendance. Although I was strongly guided by the research questions, I was careful to not disregard or neglect a theme that may have seemed irrelevant at the time since it could become relevant later as more of the analysis progressed (King, 2004).

During the final phase of data analysis, I refined the themes into subthemes (see figure 2) by searching for coherent patterns which offered strong support and enlightenment for the phenomena under study (Nowell et al). I consistently asked myself questions such as, “Does this theme accurately reflect the data and the evident meaning of the data?” or “Is this theme or issue relevant?” Persistent questioning did indeed help refine the data.

In the stage of the final analysis, all themes and sub-themes were considered complete only when I had read through and scrutinized the overall, final data multiple times to assure that nothing was overlooked. In this type of qualitative research, it is possible that something is clear to me but not to anyone else; therefore, I had to ensure that themes and sub-themes were comprehensive, straightforward, and unambiguous. For this reason, I engaged in the process of peer debriefing. The person I selected did not necessarily need to understand the case of study, but did need to understand the process of inquiry and thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, it was time to tell the data story; that is, the qualitative case study. Reporting in this section was more than just a narrative report of data. My goal was to lay out all of the pieces

of the entire research project like a neatly-patterned applique'. It was resolute in my mind, that thematic analysis should be coherent and uncomplicated yet interesting to the reader. One way to do this was to actually use quotations from participants because their words added depth to the report when recorded alongside the rich descriptions surrounding the context of the themes.

While reporting and constructing my narrative, I was certain to properly integrate literature in the right places if it supported the data being presented. It was this type of integration that built convincing explanations (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). In conclusion, if I conducted, reported, wrote, and constructed everything fittingly and congruously, then I ensured achievement of my goal. My goal was to complete an intricately woven tapestry that told the overall story of the interrelationship of caregiver perceptions of the importance of school attendance and their perceptions of barriers to school attendance and how it related to actual school attendance.

Validity, Reliability

Rounding out Merriam's methodology included accounting for validity and reliability, ensuring trustworthiness, conducting the investigation in an ethical manner, and eliminating or reducing bias. (Merriam, 1998). For this study, eliminating or reducing bias meant that I had to remove my persona as a building administrator during the interviews and take on the persona of a non-judgmental, scientific researcher. I minimized bias and achieved it successfully in several ways.

First, I did not nor have not had any administrative experience at Smithton Elementary North. Second, I have never worked, in any capacity, in the same district as Smithton prior to the fall of 2017. Third, I do not know any of the families or students who attended Smithton

Elementary North. Finally, the campus of Smithton Elementary North is located in the Northwest quadrant of town while the school where I served as a secondary administrator is located in the Southeast quadrant of town. When combined, I assuredly felt that bias was minimized or reduced to a significant degree.

Interpretive perceptions (Merriam, 1998) were heavily relied upon as I planned the inquiry, gathered in-depth data, and engaged in extensive analysis using themes and coding methods. Interpretive perceptions allowed me to decompose the generous amounts of the data so that I could recompose it to a clear, comprehensive view (Merriam, 1998) of caregiver perceptions of the importance of school attendance and caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance as those perceptions relate to actual attendance. Since I plan to communicate and contribute results to a wide variety of audiences ranging from peers to politicians who count on ethics and trustworthiness, the entire research process had to be embodied with integrity.

Ethical Considerations

Data Storage and Security

For heightened privacy, interviews were conducted in a private, discreet setting so that caregivers were never able to be identified. In fact, the caregivers were provided a wide range of options for the location of the interview and were able to individually select the location where they felt most comfortable. The records of these interviews, whether recorded or scripted, were kept private and stored in a locked file in my home office. Digital research records were stored on a password protected device accessible only to me and were also locked in my home office.

Video and audio recordings and written transcripts will be destroyed within twelve months upon completion of the study. Once the data was coded, I ensured that a link did not exist that may have allowed for the participant(s) to be re-identified. At no point throughout the course of this study were individuals identified.

Confidentiality was maintained within the confines of specified conditions required by law. For example, Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect) of a minor must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that s/he intends to harm him/her self or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. I am happy to report that those special conditions as set forth by state law were not needed during this study. The only other circumstance where confidentiality could be broken is in the event of a subpoena by a court of law. That also did not happen.

Verification Strategies and Ensuring Trustworthiness

As qualitative research expands, becomes increasingly valued and recognized, and more sophisticated, the need for trustworthy data analysis and verification becomes central to the credibility of the research (Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., and Moules, J., 2017). One way that researchers can persuade key stakeholders, such as policy makers and practitioners, that their research is not only valuable, but worthy of attention and legitimate is by establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Widely accepted and an easily recognized criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is a purposeful, step-by-step criteria that was introduced by Lincoln and Guba (Nowell et al.). This case study research applied a purposeful,

step-by-step approach to conducting thematic analysis. It demonstrated the sophisticated blend of both art and science by showcasing a systematic method of rigor that increased the *traceability and verification* of the data analysis (Nowell et al). By presenting and applying a very specific step-by-step process, traceability was achieved. Likewise, verification of the data analysis was achieved because someone else could easily follow the step-by-step process that I used. When combined, verification of the data and traceability ensured trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Achieving Credibility with Triangulation

“Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena” (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Blythe, & Neville, 2014 p. 545; Patton, 1999). Carter et al. (2014) suggests that qualitative research uses, as a key strategy, triangulation, to test validity of the research through the “convergence of information from different sources” (p. 545). While a number of methods and techniques were used to establish credibility for this study, the two most prominent were persistent observations and triangulation of the data (Merriam, 1998). Persistent observations were steady, consistent, and thorough. Triangulation of the data included the use of multiple methods of data collection, as stated in the aforementioned sections, about the phenomenon in which I studied. When the existing data was triangulated the findings were supported by more than a single source of information (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018) thus making the case study more credible. For the sake of review, the sources of information for this study were obtained from school observations, participant interviews, documents, and artifacts.

Another component of triangulation is *member checking* (Merriam, 1998). For this study, member checking was met with challenges largely due to inaccessibility of the participants once I reached the point in the study where I could ask them to review my findings and interpretations.

Transferability

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative case study research does not rely upon a standardized set of specific and measurable findings that can be applied to a broader population (Patton, 2002); however, findings from qualitative research can be generalizable in the form of transferability. Qualitative research increases depth of understanding of cases or situations that could potentially be generalizable or transferable to a similar case in a different setting, but the intent is not to generalize findings to a wider population (Patton, 2002; Nowell et al, 2017). Consequently, “transferability refers to the generalizability of inquiry” (Nowell et al, 2017). It was my responsibility as the primary instrument of this research to provide such rich, thick, abundant, and almost luxurious descriptions (like a chocolate, silk, mousse cheesecake) that anyone seeking to *transfer* findings to their own site could determine transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability and Confirmability

Researchers can achieve dependability by clearly documenting a logical and traceable trail; otherwise known as an audit trail (Nowell et al, 2017). Just as a bank auditor authenticates accounts held by the bank, an independent examiner can authenticate the findings of a qualitative research study by following the trail of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1998). As

the primary researcher, I described in detail my data collection methods, data analysis strategies, and thoroughly explained how my decisions were made throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 1998). Since I have always been one to document thoughts, both internal and external, record musings, and/or chronicle life events, using a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was a natural fit for me for the purposes of accounting the process and leaving an audit trail. It helped me maintain a self-critical account of the research process. Admittedly, the reflexive journal morphed into a combination of digital notes, journaling, and quick-notes jotted down in the moment for recording later.

Some researchers have found it easier to word process journal entries using a digital device on a weekly basis, (Erlandson et al). As a researcher, I found it to be easier to use the best tool for the moment whether it was a quick digital note on my I-pad or a simple jot on nearby paper. I documented logistics of the research, recorded methods used for decision-making, and kept records of my own reflections of insights throughout the process. Furthermore, there was a very important additional benefit of using a reflexive journal: it helped me keep my biases at bay. Consistent, ongoing notes throughout the study helped me achieve the benefit of keeping biases at bay. In conclusion, once credibility, transferability, and dependability were achieved, confirmability was established, (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

Limitations

Three areas of limitations are most present in this case study: parental sensitivity to attendance issues, non-generalizable data, and researcher bias. Since this was a study that addressed attendance issues the very topic could be sensitive to parents, thereby, risking full

disclosure of information during the interview process. If full disclosure was not gained, then there was a limitation placed upon the data. Secondly, data from the case study was not generalizable; however, it could have been transferable. Although the study might have the capacity to be transferable, transferability is specifically dependent upon context and circumstances. Therefore, the sheer nature of the context and circumstances created a limitation. Lastly, I have to recognize my own bias as a researcher. Even with all of the carefully selected components put into place, there was still the understanding that human bias exists and was a limitation in this study. For instance, I recognized that I brought a specific type of background to the study; therefore, I could have potential biases.

To begin with, I was born and raised in the same state where this study took place. Furthermore, this state is where I received my education (kindergarten through college), started and raised a family, and established my career as a professional educator. At the same time, my entire life has been lived in three different communities that fall within a forty-five mile radius in the north, central region of this same state. Each of the three communities where I lived had a population no larger than 50,000.

Another factor contributing to potential bias is the fact that the state where the study took place is located within a region of the nation known as *The Bible Belt* and *The Breadbasket of America*. These references are more than just nicknames to me. They represent a large part of my life. My father was a wheat farmer for several years, and my family was one who attended a protestant church every Sunday. Growing up the daughter of a wheat farmer and a member of a

local protestant church anchored me and have greatly defined who I am today. This is a very important acknowledgment for this study due to the potential for bias.

As the researcher, I had an ethical responsibility to approach scientific inquiry without bias; therefore I had to recognize yet another potential source of bias: my own identification of being a part of the participant's larger culture. I interviewed caregivers who lived in a community similar to the one where I grew up. Consequently, I made myself aware of my own potential tendencies to make assumptions on behalf of the interviewee. For example, I may have assumed that I knew what an interviewee might be thinking before s/he said it. I had to be careful and conscientious to guard against this reaction to assume. Additionally, I had to be mindful of the importance of striking a balance between emotional insight and the reality of the human experience (Knutson as quoted in Patton, 2014). I also had to be mindful of how my words or actions were perceived by others, sympathetic to their experiences, and had to be extra careful to not assume meanings or inadvertently leave out valuable information (Merriam, 1998).

In contrast, several benefits were in place that minimized the potential for bias. I, as the researcher, was new to the district when this study took place, the case study site was not located near my place of employment, and I did not have any personal knowledge of families or staff who worked at the case study site. When this study began, I had served as a building level principal at three different sites for a combined total of 144 months. I had been in the district where the study took place for only twenty months meaning less than 15% of my total experience as an administrator had taken place in the same district as Smithton. For these reasons, the potential for bias was minimized.

In this case study, no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective on the case; therefore, multiple sources of information and data was sought (Patton, 2005). However, when multiple sources of data are used in qualitative inquiry, the chances of error are increased as well as the opportunities for limitations. Limitations that occurred throughout this study included, but are not necessarily limited to, the emotional state of the participant, an unknown hidden-agenda of the participant or a personal bias of the participant (Patton, 2005). In like manner, limitations during observations could have become distorted if the participant being observed behaved in an atypical manner. Since I did not know the participants, I would not have necessarily picked up on their mannerisms if they were atypical unless it was extremely overt.

It is worth mentioning that documents and artifacts used in this study could have had limitations since they can vary in quality, detail, accuracy, or completeness. However, the most significant limitation could be me, the researcher, since human instruments are fallible (Merriam, 1998). As the researcher, I have made every effort to share the case's unique story, but could have made a mistake or allowed a personal bias to interfere. With all things considered, even with the limitations in this case study research, the final *product* has more merits than not.

Researcher Role

Researcher Bias

As the primary instrument, I had to be aware of my personal biases and how they may have influenced my inquiries. Included within the scope of personal biases are my own

personality traits and characteristics as well as my own ability as a researcher to have the skills necessary to properly conduct this research (Merriam, 1998). Not only did I have to be mindful and aware of my biases at the onset of the research, I had to consistently exercise discretion every step of the way (Merriam, 1998). To achieve this, I will carried with me an ongoing self-check system. My thirty years of experiences as a professional educator in a university town located in a mid-western state largely contribute to who I am professionally. Inasmuch, it was these same experiences that may have contributed to any personal or professional bias in the study.

At age twenty I taught my first group of students as a university intern. Upon graduation I landed my first job as a pre-kindergarten teacher at a private school in the university town from where I graduated. The following year I entered the public school system, still in the same university town, as a teacher assistant for fourth and fifth grade *Educably Mentally Handicapped* (EMH) students. Remaining at this Title I elementary school of nearly 600, I became a self-contained, generalist teacher in first grade for five years, second grade for one year, and fifth grade for ten years.

After completing eighteen years of classroom experience, I became a principal. Over the course of a summer, I moved directly from a teaching position at a low-performing, Title I elementary school to an administrative position at a high-performing, high socio-economic school located in the opposite quadrant of town. I served as their principal for five years. After five years of serving as the building principal and the only administrator in the building of the high socio-economic elementary school, I was administratively reassigned back to the

elementary school where I had taught for seventeen years. I served as their principal for seven years.

Towards the latter end of the seven-year principalship, I entered a doctoral program at a nearby university. With my eye on a superintendency after graduation, I decided to broaden my horizons by leaving the only district of my employment history to take a position as a junior high principal in a rural district twenty-four miles away. With the junior high principal position came a lucrative opportunity to serve the same district as their director of professional development. Both positions created for me opportunities that I would have never had if I would have stayed in the district that had been my professional comfort-zone for way too many years.

My personal biases were heavily influenced by the aforementioned experiences. As a researcher, I had to be aware of how these personal biases may have contaminated my investigation (Merriam, 1998, p. 21) which meant that I had to exercise discretion each step of the way. For example, when I interviewed a caregiver of an elementary aged child, I had to resist any impulse to assume that I knew the meaning of the participants' responses and/or refrain from completing their sentences for them. Merriam (1998) says that for some researchers qualitative research is like an *uncharted ocean* that is full of promise and discovery but for others it could prove to be an experience that is "disorienting and unproductive". For me, this qualitative case study research was full of promise and discovery. Since I naturally embrace change and enjoy surprises I was very comfortable entering uncharted territory. Further, since I am comfortable with ambiguity and at ease with a route changing when least expected it was easy for me to embrace the research involved for this case study. Examining all facets of an inquiry and

following its lead rather than forcing the experience into a preferred direction is a measure that I was willing to take.

My worldview is influenced by more than my professional education experiences. I recognize that when I observed, interviewed, or analyzed data, it was that gathered data that was filtered through me, the human, primary instrument (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). Admittedly, the researcher's perceptions are initially subjective, however, because of my own self-awareness and commitment to not taint or color any type of data, I put my subjectivity aside and replaced it with an objective filter. This objective filter assisted me with focusing on interpretation and making meaning of the full set of data with such insight and sensitivity, that it was observed, recorded, and analyzed in the most objective manner as *humanly* possible.

My personal experiences contribute to my worldview more than my professional experiences which means that I had to be mindful of my own worldview bias. I was born and raised in the southernmost region of *America's Breadbasket*. Endless miles of untouched prairie were my natural domain. Summer evening sounds of bullfrogs, cicadas, and occasional distant doleful cries of coyotes wrapped me nightly in comfort with their tranquil melodies. In contrast, trudging through winter snows down the two hundred yard trek from my house to the school bus stop, left me longing for city life where there was no red mud or long walks home.

Schooling was nothing more than a captivating and enchanting experience for me. I delighted in school every year, kindergarten through twelfth grade. My friends and I talked regularly about how much we loved school. Not surprisingly, of my closest friends, five of the

six of us became teachers. We all left town to attend the same university and then went our separate ways into the field of teaching.

Part of growing up in a small, mid-western town of 5,000 was the sound of church bells. The old adage of a church on every corner resonated true in our small community. Moving from south to north was the Methodist Church at 6th and Elm, the Baptist church at 6th and Fir, and the Nazarene Church at 6th and Grove. Moving from East to West starting with the Methodist church, was the Presbyterian Church at 7th and Elm, the Christian Church at 8th and Elm and the Catholic Church at 9th and Elm. While there may have been some, I did not know a single student who did not attend one of these churches. For us, attending church on a weekly basis was just something that we did. It was our lifestyle. You could say that the majority of our small community citizens were *regular church-goers*.

Rural. Protestant. Oil. Wheat. Lazy summers. Blustery winters. Whether we were preparing for crop harvest in late spring or bobbing for apples in late October our quaint, little city was picturesque-like of a Norman Rockwell scene situated in the middle of a prairie. This is who I am. It is these experiences that have shaped me; however, they also contribute deeply to my biases. As a qualitative researcher and human instrument, I must had to carefully to cultural context, social signals, and intrinsic values of others, while laying aside my worldview so that it didn't influence my data and study (Merriam, 1998).

Last, but not least, is most likely my strongest bias for this particular research inquiry. In fact, it is so strong, that it could potentially sway my theoretical position if not kept in check. I

am heavily influenced by the work of Dr. Constance Kamii. In turn, that means that I am indirectly influenced by the work of Jean Piaget.

Through attending the local university summer Writing Project, I learned of the work of Dr. Constance Kamii. Quickly, I embraced her philosophy of student autonomy and her *constructivist* approach to teaching math to elementary aged students. Eagerly, and with precision, I successfully implemented constructivist math theories in my elementary classroom where I witnessed young learners develop autonomy and construct their own mathematical-logical strategies for solving problems. The following year, after moving from second grade to fifth grade, I applied the same theoretical approach of *constructivism* to fifth grade math. It was wildly successful. For eleven years, I witnessed the benefits of students learning to construct mathematical-logical concepts rather than rely on tricks to perform algorithms.

Early in my fifth grade teaching years, my school contracted with Dr. Kamii to visit our site and provide our teachers with professional development regarding the aforementioned concepts and theories. She came because I personally called her and invited her. At first, she rejected my invitation because she had an unfavorable response from a teaching staff in a nearby district. However, I explained to her that the majority of teachers at my school were not of traditional thinking, had read her books, were applying her theories in their classrooms with a great deal of success, and wanted to learn more. Finally, after much persuasion, she agreed.

During her visit to my school, she personally gave feedback to four classroom teachers as she observed them teaching math lessons. I was one of them. On that day, I taught a math lesson over percentages, decimals, and fractions. Dr. Kamii observed my instruction. While students

were working, she asked them questions. At the end of the day, Dr. Kamii met with me one-on-one to provide to me invaluable coaching feedback. She identified what I did well and what I could do better. Additionally, she shared with me feedback from her conversations with my students. She even agreed to send to me a current article that she was working on for a professional journal.

Several weeks later, I ran into a friend from the university education faculty, who drove Dr. Kamii back to the airport. My friend told me that Dr. Kamii specifically referenced me during the drive. Completely unsolicited, she said to my friend, “Andrea Rains. She is the most constructivist teacher I’ve ever met.” For a teacher like me to be recognized by a world renowned leading expert like her, was one of my proudest moments as an educator.

That following summer, I applied and was accepted to Dr. Kamii’s annual math seminar for teachers made available to teachers in the U.S. and Canada. To be selected was an honor since she chose only twenty a year. We attended her seminar at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. We attended to learn, at a deeper level, the theories behind constructing knowledge according to Jean Piaget. During the summer seminar she spoke frequently of her three years of work with Jean Piaget in Geneva, Switzerland. Upon completion of that work, Dr. Kamii applied Piaget’s theory of constructivism to a variety of learning situations in numerous countries allowing her to confirm his theory, expand on his theory, and teach his theory to others (personal knowledge). In my classroom, my experiences with instructing students to construct mathematical-logical knowledge and to develop autonomy continued to confirm Dr. Kamii’s findings.

Two years later, Dr. Kamii visited my state once again thanks to a collaborative partnership between the public school system and the local university to bring her back to our state and city for a symposium. I was a member of that collaborative, educator team due to my previous involvement with Dr. Kamii's trainings and presentations.

It is important to me, as the primary researcher of this case, to divulge the degree of impact that Dr. Kamii's work has had on me. Inasmuch, I explained, at length, my professional relationship and experiences with her. Since I was the primary instrument for data collection, I recognized that my automatic default filter and theoretical position bias, (Merriam, 1998) is through the lens of constructivism as suggested by Dr. Kamii's research.

Summary

Chapter III outlines, in detail, my qualitative case study methodology, framework, and plan to explore the interrelationship of caregiver perceptions of the importance of school attendance and caregiver perceptions of barriers to student attendance as they relate to actual attendance. The chapter opens with identification of qualitative inquiry and an explanation of case study characteristics. Also included with the design plan is the data collection and data analysis strategies that align with Sharan Merriam's qualitative research applications in education (1998).

Purposeful sampling was utilized for participant selection from a pool of parents who had elementary aged children who were either high attenders or low attenders at Smithton Elementary North, a rural Title 1 school located in north central Oklahoma. Criteria for selected participants was also provided. The selected criteria provided a boundary type of focus for the

case. For example, the case *fences* (Merriam, 1998) in certain criteria of participants who reside within the rural community of a northern Oklahoma school district.

Interviews were the primary data collection tools (Merriam, 1998) used to yield quality data that specifically addressed the research questions. Informal observations were conducted coupled with documents and artifacts that were collected in order to triangulate the data so that the research study was credible and trustworthy. Ensuring trustworthiness is also addressed through validity and reliability as well as verification strategies.

One of the most defined characteristics of this qualitative case study highlighted the fact that data collection and data analysis happened at the same time (Merriam, 1998), following a constant comparative method. While this was happening there was an emergence of themes and concepts that required a process for sorting and coding. This process is also outlined in this chapter. Ethical considerations such as data storage, anonymity of participants and security of the data was described in detail. Limitations of the study as well as researcher bias was also addressed.

Since researcher bias plays a role in any human inquiry, an acknowledgement of my worldview and what has influenced my world view was included. As the primary instrument, I had to be aware of my personal biases and how they may have influenced my inquiries; therefore, I included a dense description of both my personal and professional background. Such description leaves me vulnerable and exposed as a researcher and that is intentional. I want the reader to know exactly what influences me so that s/he can determine whether or not my biases

were put aside during the research; thus, adding a layer of accountability for me as I researched, collected data, analyzed data, and inferred findings.

In conclusion, qualitative case study was the best design for my study because it provided the ability or the allowance to delimit the object of my study (Merriam, 1998): a picture of chronic absenteeism as seen through parent perceptions of barriers to student attendance.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Chapter IV presents data collected throughout the study, largely interview data and observational data. The major sources of data are followed by demographic data, description of the population and sample, participant criteria, and the description of the selection process. Chapter IV also includes written profiles of the twelve participants who make up the sample coupled with an at-a-glance table of their data profiles. Following the written profiles is a presentation of observational data collected in the school setting. Closing the end of the chapter

is a list of documents and artifacts referenced during the study. When synthesized, all of the above combine for a prominent and salient understanding of the population and sample under study.

The purpose of this study is, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to explore the interrelatedness of family perceptions of the importance of school attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance and actual student attendance. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was utilized in this study to explain the interrelationship of family and caregiver perceptions regarding the importance of attendance and family perceptions of barriers to student attendance at the elementary level (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2015; Pellerin, 2005; Van Acker & Wheby, 2000). The following research questions guided this study.

Overarching question, "How are family perceptions regarding attendance/barriers to attendance and actual student attendance interrelated?"

1. What are family perceptions of the importance of their child's attendance at school?
2. Do perceptions regarding the importance of attendance differ between families of high attending students and low attending students? If so, how?
3. What are family perceptions of barriers to their children's attendance?
4. How does Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explain the interrelationship between family perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to attendance and actual attendance at school?

The chapter begins by providing a rich in-depth, description of the population where the data was collected. After the description of the population is a presentation of the participant criteria, followed by an explanation of the selection process for the sample. Since this study sought perceptions of caregivers whose children attend Smithton Elementary North, a narrative of the twelve participants is provided.

Population

Smithton Community

Smithton Public Schools (a pseudonym) has a population of 6,849 people within its boundaries. It covers 199 square miles (OEQA, 2018), of which most is prairie grass and farm land. On average, household income in Smithton is \$69,826 with a median of \$52,227.

Smithton's unemployment rate sets at 9.6% which is much lower than the state unemployment rate of 16.2%. Nearly 28% of its population, twenty-five or older, have a bachelor's degree. In comparison, ten percent of the same population, twenty-five or older, do not hold a high school degree.

Smithton school district enjoys wide support from its community members as well as its business partners. Community members take great pride in the legacy of their award-winning band program as well as newfound success in their football, basketball, and baseball programs (Personal interview, 2019). Primary business partners include two local banks, two local pharmacies, two auto dealerships, and one international manufacturer. In the recent past, these business partners have provided such things as T-shirts and hoodies for teachers and staff

members, bicycles for students, grant money for supplemental classroom materials, and even a new Ford F-150 for the school's vocational agricultural program (Personal interview, 2019).

Centrally located in the interior of the community is the town square. Surrounded by small businesses on the perimeter of the square is a four-story, county seat, municipal building and a large, circular, white-washed gazebo. In small-town, rural fashion, the gazebo is used for seasonal band performances and special events. Like many town-square communities, there is a popular café, sandwich shop, hair salon, and drug store nestled in between other businesses such as insurance agencies and law offices. Each fall, Smithton hosts an annual parade that marches around the streets of town square. From bands and whistles to horses and twirlers, the parade adds to the unique charm of this community.

Smithton School District

In the wee hours of any given fall morning can be heard the start-and-stop measured practice of the high school band. Band practice is on a field two blocks west from the town square which means that nearby residents and merchants get to hear the half-time show each morning. Toward the end of morning marching band practice, as if on cue, chimes sound from a nearby church as though signaling a coda for the band's final song. This is just one of many examples that create the *feel* for the Smithton community.

Within the Smithton community is Smithton Public Schools. The district in its entirety is comprised of multiple academic, athletic, and extra-curricular facilities. Academic school structures are two elementary school buildings, one middle level building, and one high school

building. Sport facility structures are a football stadium, basketball gymnasium, wrestling facility, softball fields, and baseball fields.

Located on the secondary campus is a mid-high building and a high school building. The secondary campus also includes a five hundred seat performing arts center, a technology education building, an agricultural education building, seven hundred seat gymnasium and a marching band field.

About two miles east of the secondary campus is an athletic facility that houses a twenty-four hundred seat stadium that encircles a one hundred yard football gridiron. A four hundred meter track surrounds the regulation size football field. Flanking the east and west sides of the field are two grandstands coupled with dressing rooms at the south end. At the far north of the field is a stand-alone concession stand while at the other end of the field is a wrestling practice facility. Directly behind the football stadium, due east, is a rodeo arena, two baseball fields and four softball fields. An impressive feature of the football stadium is its distinctive stonework. The sandstone structure was built of coursed native stone by the Works Project Administration (WPA) in 1939 (The History Exchange, 2019).

Figure 3



Figure 4 Photo of WPA sandstone structure at local football stadium. Photographer Andrea Rains

Smithton Neighborhoods

Neighborhood students who live within the proximity of the schools walk to school on most mornings. The following paragraphs describe the neighborhoods near the elementary school.

On the western-most edge of town, running North and South, is North 32nd street. Running parallel, to the immediate east of North 32nd street, is a new, pedestrian friendly sidewalk. The street and sidewalk separate the neighborhood from the school. To the east of the North 32nd street are small to medium, one story, red, grey, or sandstone colored brick homes built during the early era of modern, concrete slab foundations as opposed to their counterpart stem wall or pier foundations. Chain link fences and a few wood fences enclose a large number of back yards while other yards are completely exposed and without borders. Peppering the rural-town backyards are conventional pieces of personal property such as barbeque grills, dog houses, vegetable gardens, and bird baths.

Nestled among mature oak, elm, and maple trees are three different sections of the neighboring housing additions: Pinewood Terrace, Cedar Ridge, and Whispering Oaks. About forty to fifty homes make up each of the neighborhoods. Natural factors such as shallow creeks, rocky terrain, and undeveloped fields provide borders for the neighborhoods. Children who reside in these homes walk to school with siblings or friends, or ride their bicycles. Some children are driven to school by a caregiver. School bus transportation is not an option for these neighborhood children because they live within a 1.5 mile radius of the school.

The west side of North 32nd street is a stark contrast from the east side. Two sprawling, single-story school buildings sit in the middle of an expansive, grassy tract of land that is at least four city blocks in length. Directly behind the playgrounds of the two school buildings are hundreds of acres of prairie grass and pasture land. Often, passersby see grazing Angus cattle in the pastureland behind the schools. Further behind the acreages of grazing cattle is a sizable manufacturing plant which is also the city's largest employer. This manufacturing plant employs approximately 900 people, of which half live in Smithton and the other half commute from nearby from cities (website, 2018).

The north school building, known as the Middle Childhood Center (pseudonym), houses grades third through sixth. The south school building, known as the Early Childhood Center (pseudonym), houses students in grades pre-kindergarten through second grade. When combined, both campuses form a single unit called Smithton Elementary School which sets in the far Northwest Corner of the rural city. Looking up North 32nd street, as far north as possible, is a white water tower, situated where the pavement of street meets country road. It is as an informal landmark that signifies the end of city limits.

Smithton Elementary School

Smithton Elementary School, surrounded by prairie grass and farmland, is a campus with two separate brownish-red, brick buildings. Both buildings are connected with a long sidewalk covered with metal roofing. They are the only two structures on the tract which spans about six city blocks in length and four city blocks in width. The north building hosts about three hundred fourth through sixth grade students. The south building hosts about four hundred pre-

kindergarten through third grade students. Blue skies, often partly cloudy, and light breezes provide comfortable and relaxed external conditions on most days of the school year.

Educationally speaking, Smithton Elementary students have a wide range of academic levels. Nearly fourteen percent qualify for special education services while another thirty-two percent receive reading remediation as per the Reading Sufficiency Act for the state of Oklahoma. However, less than 1% are considered English Language Learners (Oklahoma Reading Sufficiency Act, 2018).

Table 1

Smithton’s Student Body Profile

Component	Percentage
KDG – 3 rd Graders receiving remediation	32.4%
Parents attending Parent/Teacher Conference	65%
Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch	55.4%
Percent of Students in Special Education	13.6%
Mobility Rate of incoming students	5.9%

Note. OEQA, 2018

Based on a 175 school-day calendar, the average number of days missed by each of Smithton’s 670 students is 9.5 days; the state average being 10.4 days (OEQA, 2018).

Suspension accounts for some of these absences. According to OEQA (2018) there was one suspension (of ten days or less) for every twelve students. Comparatively, the state average was

one suspension for every 15.6 students. However, suspensions of more than 10 days tells a different story: zero. There are zero suspensions of more than 10 days for every 670 students.

Socioeconomically, 55% of students in the district are eligible for free/reduced lunch. According to the OEQA 2018 report, Smithton’s student body make up by race/ethnicity has little diversity.

Table 2

Smithton’s Student Body by Race/Ethnicity

Race	Percentage
Caucasian	79%
Native American	10.3%
Hispanic	4%
Black	2.7%
Asian	0.8%
Two or More Races	3.3%

Note. OEQA, 2018.

Participant Criteria and Selection Process

Participant Criteria

Interviews with participants occurred during the 2019-2020 school year. Selected participants had to meet the following criteria in order to be interviewed: the participant must

- have at least one elementary aged child in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade who is either a high attender or low attender
- reside in the district of the selected school
- be a healthy, mentally-able adult aged 20-60
- be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview.

Participant Selection Process

During the 2018-2019 school year, I solicited assistance from the Early Childhood Center building principal. I asked her to identify twenty caregivers who had children considered to be high attending students and met the above criteria, as well as the names of twenty caregivers who had children considered to be low attending students and met the above criteria. Altogether, a total of forty names was provided.

To move from a large population of adults whose children attended Smithton, then to a pool of forty, and finally to a sample of twelve, I used purposeful criterion sampling. For the purposes of this study, high attending students are those who are absent fewer than four times per academic school year. Low attending students are those who are absent more than ten times per academic school year. Many of the low attending students are, by definition of the state of Oklahoma, *chronically absent*. In the state of Oklahoma, fifteen or more absences, for any reason, per academic school year is considered chronically absent.

An *Invitation to Participate* e-mail letter was composed and sent to the forty caregivers in the early fall of 2019. Only two responded. Since the email communication failed to establish itself as a useful communication tool, I determined to use a different method of contact. I called or sent a text message. Text messaging proved to be the most useful and provided an important level of comfort for the participant.

First, I made a phone call to a caregiver whose name was on my list of forty. If the caregiver answered the phone, I explained who I was and the purpose of my phone call. I used this same information if the call went to voice mail. If there was no answer nor voicemail, I sent to the caregiver a text message with the same information. As referenced above, text messaging became the primary mode of communication.

I contacted caregivers until I reached the desired sample size of twelve. Furthermore, six were caregivers of high attending students and six were caregivers of low attending students.

Aware of my *stance* toward the interviewee (Merriam, 1998), I carefully set the tone for future interviews during my initial contact. Succinctly, yet thoroughly, I explained the purpose of my call then quickly captured the interest of each respondent by expressing legitimate interest in their personal views and opinions. Each perspective and perception they held, I told them, offered something valuable to the study.

Assuming neutrality (Merriam, 1998), then gaining and maintaining rapport with each respondent, I offered each participant four different locations for the interview: their home, a local eatery, a local conference room, or their place of employment. My goal was to

accommodate them in order to create an optimal level of comfort for them. I performed this task until interviews with twelve adults from the original pool of forty were secured.

Using an open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix C) the data collection process began. One-on-one interview data is the primary source of data for this case study; therefore, I constantly and consistently positioned my stance as sensitive, respectful, and nonjudgmental (Merriam, 1998).

During the interview process, an audio recording device was used to ensure preservation of everything said (Merriam, 1998). Written notes highlighted out-of-the-ordinary responses and noted questions for further investigation. In conclusion, pseudonyms or assigned numbers for each participant assured protection of anonymity (Merriam, 1998).

Sample

The sample of this study includes twelve middle-class adults who have elementary-aged children, Pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade, who attend Smithton Elementary. Of these twelve adults, three are male and nine are female. Six females work outside of the home and three females do not. Of the three females who do not work outside of the home, one describes herself as a *stay-at-home* mom, while another asserts herself as an occasional assistant to her husband who owns a farm equipment business. The third female did not reference the perception of her position within the home. Of the three males, two work full time and one is looking for employment. Each participant was cooperative, supportive, and eager to participate in the interview.

Participant Profiles

Participant #1

Participant one is a married female with three children. Her husband works full time though the location was not disclosed. Her oldest child is a nineteen-year-old daughter living in Arkansas. Her middle child is a fourth-grade girl and her youngest child is a second-grade boy. Both attend Smithton Elementary. Participant one is a staff writer for a local newspaper. She is the primary transporter of children to and from school each day.

Participant #2

Participant two describes herself as from a “middle class family.” She is married with four children. The oldest child is male and no longer lives in the home. Of the three still in school, one is a male high school student, the next one is a male sixth-grade student, and the youngest is a female fourth-grade student. She drives them to and from school each morning. Both she and her husband work full time.

Participant #3

Participant three is a married male. He describes his family as a “blended family much like the Brady Bunch.” He has two children, a ninth-grade male and a tenth-grade female from a previous marriage. His wife has one seventh-grade female child from a previous marriage. Together they have one daughter who is a first-grader at Smithton. Both he and his wife work full time. He works in town, and his wife works out of town. He is the primary provider of transportation for all four children.

Participant #4

Participant four is a married female who does not work outside of the home. Altogether, she and her husband have five children. Two of the five attend Smithton Elementary. One is a fourth-grade female and the other is a fifth-grade male. Of the other three, there are two toddlers at home and a fifteen-year-old who attends school in a different district yet visits their household two weekends a month. The two school-aged children are taken to school each morning by their grandfather and picked up after school by either her or her husband.

Participant #5

Participant five is a married female with three children. Her oldest is an eighth-grade female student. Her two elementary aged students are a sixth-grade male and a second-grade female. She is the primary provider of transportation. Participant five is a stay-at-home mom while her husband works full time at a local drilling company.

Participant #6

Participant six is a female who has been married for twenty-five years. Both she and her husband are employed fulltime. She has one child who is a fourth-grade male. She is the primary provider of transportation for her son.

Participant #7

Participant seven is a female caregiver who has been married for almost a year. Her husband is employed full time at a large manufacturing plant where he has to be at work at 6:00 AM. For this reason, she is the primary provider of transportation for their children. She works full time as a receptionist/bookkeeper at a local business. She has a third-grade male student and a seventh-grade female student.

Participant #8

Participant eight is a female caregiver who describes herself as a “mother of four” with a “busy family”. She is married and has three boys and a girl. The oldest three are male: sixth-grade, second-grade, and Pre-kindergarten. Her daughter is two and stays at home with her during the day, although she works at night. She gets off work at 7:00 AM then goes home to get everyone ready for school. Once they are ready, her husband takes them to school. She describes school events as important, but has been unable to attend any extra school events this year due to work schedules and student illness.

Participant #9

Participant nine is a married female. She and her husband of sixteen years have lived in Smithton for only seven years. They have three children aged 13, 12, and 10. Although her children could ride the bus to and from school, she chooses not to use the public school bus system. Instead, she provides transportation for her three children. Her husband is a local business owner where she assists on a part time basis as needed.

Participant #10

Participant ten is engaged to be married. She has two children. One is a pre-kindergarten male student and the other is a nine-month old. Her fiancé has one child who is high school aged. Her husband works full time for the city’s largest employer, a local manufacturing plant. She describes herself as a “stay-at-home mom.”

Participant #11

Participant eleven is a male caregiver who recently married. He is employed full time at a local business. He and his wife have two young children of whom both are male. One is in pre-kindergarten and the other is in kindergarten. Transportation to school is generally provided by his wife, although an aunt who recently moved in with them sometimes provides transportation.

Participant #12

Participant twelve is a male caregiver who lives alone with his three daughters. His three daughters began living with him about three years ago because they were no longer able to live with their mother. His oldest daughter is a sixth-grader. The other two are twins and are in third grade. At the time of the interview he was unemployed, but looking for work.

Table 3

Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Employment Status	High/Low	Days Absent
1	F	Full Time	High	0
2	F	Full Time	High	3.5
3	M	Full Time	Low	11
4	F	Unemployed	Low	10
5	F	Unemployed	High	3
6	F	Full Time	High	0
7	F	Full Time	Low	14.5
8	F	Unemployed	Low	24
9	F	Unemployed	High	2

10	F	Unemployed	Low	25
11	M	Full Time	Low	18
12	M	Unemployed	High	4

Note. High attending students have zero-four absences in the 2019-2020 school year. Low attending students have ten or more absences in the 2019-2020 school year.

Steps for Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) posits that there is a right way and a wrong way to analyze qualitative data. In her book, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, she says, “...the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* with data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162). In fact, data analysis is likely the only facet of qualitative research where a right way and wrong way exists.

Coding

For my study, I followed Merriam’s *right* way to analyze data by implementing and maintaining an ongoing data analysis system which will be described in detail later in the chapter. The data analysis system developed early in the study was a manual coding system that allowed me to observe in the field and conduct interviews while simultaneously coding data gained from those observations and interviews as opposed to waiting until the end of the interviews and observations.

Since this is a qualitative study, I had no idea what I might discover so I had to have a meaningful system of organization early on. Therefore, by applying Merriam's method of *simultaneity*, the data was easily organized thereby preventing the analysis from being unfocused, repetitious, and ill-defined (Merriam, 1998). Admittedly, the system at first was rudimentary but became more refined as the study wore on. From a personal point of view, this type of management system kept me from feeling like the data was piling up into a mountain of random and disorganized pieces of data. From a researcher point of view, I recognized the potential to feel overwhelmed by the data and did not want to succumb to that feeling because I knew it could easily thwart or derail any forward progress. It is important for me, as the researcher, to note that while the coding system for this study was thoughtfully organized, it was not so rigid that pre-established rules were applied (Merriam, 1998). In fact, rigid, pre-established rules would have defeated the purpose of *following the data*.

Types and Levels of Coding

First, and perhaps most obvious, I organized the data into three very broad categories: interviews, observations, and documents. After each participant was interviewed, their digital recording and transcription went into the interview category. After making observations, all records of those observations such as handwritten notes or digital recordings, went into the observation category. Finally, all documents such as notes sent home from the school or state department reports went into the document category. These three categories were very easy to recognize and establish.

Participant coding. Next, a coding system was developed. Each participant interview was coded with a pseudonym, a participant number, gender, number of school-age children, employment status if known, marital status if known, and date of interview. As the researcher, the pseudonym coding system allowed me to access a particular transcript or to pull several transcripts from the total set of any of the above dimensions (Merriam, 1998). For example, if desired, I could pull transcripts for stay-at-home women, single parent households, or unemployed parents with two or more children.

Transcript coding. First, I created three broad categories as referenced above. Next, I refined the information from the categories by assigning codes, in the form of words, which provided specific identifying information such as gender or employment status. I call this a level one coding.

Followed by the level one coding system is a level two coding system that I developed by using colors. The color coding system helped me identify themes throughout the text of the interview transcripts. Each transcript was broken down into multiple themes. I did this by highlighting or assigning each theme with a particular color. For example, the theme of student transportation to/from school surfaced in many interviews; therefore I chose to highlight all *transportation* text from the interview transcripts. Initially, eighteen themes from the interviews surfaced, so I had to use get creative and specific with colors. For example, the theme of transportation was assigned the color of honeydew melon, the theme of school day absences was

assigned dark azure blue, and the theme of school attendance policy was assigned light seafoam green.

Coding within themes. Quickly, I recognized that there were sub-themes within each theme. For example, in one interview transcript I highlighted three paragraphs that specifically referenced transportation. These three paragraphs were highlighted with the color of honeydew melon. Within the color-coded theme surfaced several important nuggets of information that needed to be extracted or pulled out of the whole so that it became a stand-alone piece of data. Consequently, each stand-alone piece of information received a label. For example, within the theme of transportation for those three paragraphs, there were three separate pieces of information that needed to be sub-coded with labels: who provides transportation, type of transportation, and attitudes towards transportation.

As a rule, the color coding method was applied to all information contained within the observational data as well as the documents. For instance, if one part of a document, such as a newspaper article, addressed transportation, it was coded with the color of honeydew melon. In like manner, each part of an observation transcript that referenced transportation was also color coded honeydew melon.

In brief conclusion, the coding management system provided me with an organized format that allowed for ease of retrieval when specific pieces of data were needed (Merriam, 1998). First, I identified three primary categories. Next, I identified themes within the categories followed by sub-themes. See Figure 2

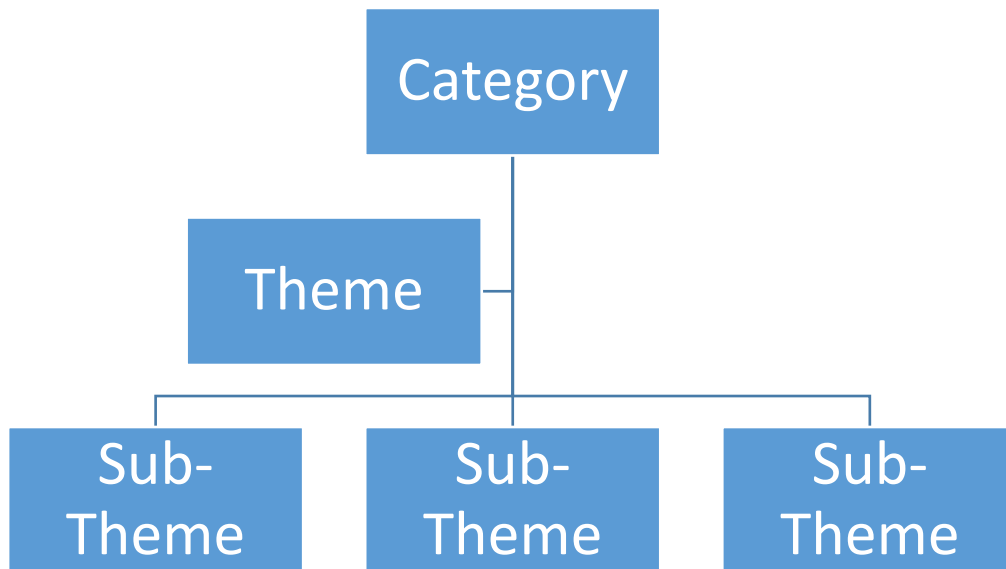


Figure 4

Observational Data

Data from interviews was the primary type of data for this study, though it was not the sole type of data. Field observations in their natural settings (Merriam, 1998), such as the school setting in this case, served as a major means of collecting data and notes from the observations provided a secondary type of data (Merriam, 1998). For the purpose of collecting data, I observed in the school setting which yielded complex and multifaceted data that will be described in detail in Chapter Five.

Experiences that I observed in the school setting were unable to be seen during the interviews. Moreover, they captured what respondents may not be willing to discuss in the

interviews (Merriam, 1998). Another purpose for on-site observations was to combine both types of data, observational data and interview data, so that a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 1998) could be crafted and then presented in a combined fashion like an impressionistic watercolor that tells a story. Together, the blended product had the capacity to create vivid images for the reader.

I identified two strategic locations to observe and collect field data: the school's front parking lot and the school's front office. Particularly, observations were made in the school parking lot before, during, and after morning student arrival and in the school front office before, during, and after morning student arrival. Additional observations were made of the neighborhoods to the east of the school and the agricultural surroundings to the west of the school as well as the community in general. To collect these types of community observations, I simply drove around the surrounding areas while dictating notes to my I-pad.

Picturesque portrayals of multiple scenarios which occurred during the school observations are presented as snapshots in Chapter Five. Additionally, the snapshots are an analysis of day-to-day activities that take place in the natural setting of the school. They include the activities and behaviors of caregivers, staff, and children in their natural school and neighborhood environment. My goal in presenting snapshots as a type of observational data analysis is to provide the reader with a *feel* and sense of the phenomena being investigated, that one cannot get from a document or an interview (Merriam, 1998).

Documents and Artifacts as Data Sources

Document gathering was vital to my study because it served as a substitute for records of activity that I was unable to directly observe (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Documents collected were:

- Oklahoma School Report Card 2017
- Oklahoma Accountability Report Card 2018
- District Policies
- Newspaper Articles
- Notes home from school officials
- State attendance/truancy policies, laws, and/or statutes
- Personal notes made during observations
- Federal, State, and Local websites as they pertained to public education and student attendance

All of the above referenced artifacts and documents are directly related to and directly aided in demonstrating my overarching research question: how does the phenomena of caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance and caregiver perceptions of the importance of school attendance manifest itself in schools? When combined with all data, a finding could potentially be identified.

Summary

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the population and sample under study. The participant criteria is presented along with the process for selecting the participants. Brief written profiles are provided for each of the twelve participants. An at-a-glance table is provided for the

reader to quickly access relevant information about the participants such as their age, gender, and number of children.

The steps taken for data analysis are described. Steps include the manual coding system that was developed to manage raw data as it occurred throughout the study. The types of observational data is also presented. Finally, the chapter closes with a list of documents and artifacts gathered during the study.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Chapter five presents research findings in the forms of researcher impressions, observations, themes, and narrative responses to the research questions. First, I present my overall general impressions of the district, school, and participants. Second, descriptive images of my observations in the form of narrative *snapshots*, are presented. Snapshots include school parking lot observations and front office observations. Next, themes are presented in a synthesized, descriptive format. Finally, narrative responses to the research questions are presented.

Researcher Impressions

Observing the school neighborhood and the school itself was a satisfying and pleasurable experience. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, this school and its surroundings evoked sentiments reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell scene nestled on an Oklahoma prairie. All parts of the observational experience were comfortable and relaxed. I liken it to partaking in a slow-paced, self-guided tour of a new vacation spot. Although there was much chatter around me while in the school, the manner in which I positioned myself felt placid.

Overall, I appreciated and enjoyed speaking with and learning from participants. Participants were eager to share their personal perspectives and perceptions. At the same time, I perceived them as feeling honored to be selected to participate in this study. They demonstrated a healthy sense of pride in their own level of expertise regarding the topics discussed in the interviews.

District Impressions

Smithton school district is the heartbeat of the town. From the interviews (2019), I learned that community members attend sporting events, chili suppers, and band fundraisers. The local newspaper covers district and building level events on a weekly basis. Whatever is happening within the district, is talked about by patrons at a local coffee shop or eatery. Community members take pride in their district and provide support by being present and involved. Smithton is a tight-knit community full of residents who seemingly take care of one another and support education.

Neighborhood Impressions

Overall, the immediate and nearby surrounding neighborhoods of Smithton Elementary are quaint in an old fashioned sort of way. A new sidewalk, when combined with an older, but well taken care of neighborhood, suggests amiable qualities of its residents. Students who live in these neighborhoods represent middle income families. Although Smithton has a lower income section of town, it is not within walking distance of the school. Likewise, there is an upper income section of town that is not within walking distance of the school. Since Smithton is a

rural town, there are numerous students who live outside of the city limits and require public school bus transportation to school.

Two school buildings, perhaps twenty years old, make up the elementary campus and are much newer than the surrounding neighborhood homes that were built in the sixties and seventies. Since the school buildings are fairly new, it is one of several examples that the community supports education since new school construction relies heavily on bond money which in turn relies on the vote of the people.

School Impressions

If I had to describe, in a single word, the overall feel of morning arrival at Smithton Elementary school, the word would be cheerful. Students carried an eager disposition as they made their way to the building. When the groups of children exited the bus, their chatter was vivacious and full of energy.

Within the building were spirited teachers and staff. There was a feeling of community and the communication style of the teachers and staff was quick and ardent. To enumerate, time in a school is like a rare commodity; therefore, communication between the adults must be timely and efficient. From the vantage point of a professional educator, I reflected on the school climate and recognized it as a desirable place to work.

Participant Impressions

Overall, participants were cooperative, pleasant, and eager to participate. There was a relaxed and comfortable feeling between the researcher and the participants during the interviews. In fact, one participant reached out to me about three months after the interview

asking if she could interview me for a personal project that she was working on. Her exact words to me were, “I knew from the first time I met you that I wanted to get to know you better.” Her comment, coupled with the other participants’ perceived level of comfort, assured me that I was attaining one of my researcher goals of establishing trust and transparency while conveying a non-judgmental position. When it came time for talking about their personal life experiences with their children’s schooling, participants teemed with due pride.

I recall, towards the end of the interviews, thinking that all caregivers must have had high attending children. Why did I think this? Their responses to certain questions about attendance communicated to me that their children were seldom absent, which in my mind would be two to three times per year. I noted this oddity as something to give notice to during the data analysis portion of the study with specific regards to *actual attendance* compared to perceived attendance.

Nine of the twelve participants were employed full time at local or nearby businesses. One was unemployed and looking for work. The other two were self-described stay-at-home moms. Each participant had a means of transportation to the interview which suggested to me that each participant had means to transport their children to and from school. Although at the time of the interviews, it was just a mental note to tuck away until I was able to fully unfold the data and understand exactly what their transportation scenarios were like.

Generally speaking, clothing styles of participants were very casual: jeans, t-shirts, walking shoes, or boots. Equally noted, three of the female participants arrived at the interview in professional wear, which, for them, was a dressy-casual style of a blouse or collared shirt and slacks.

Taking everything into account, such as the aforementioned, participants seemed to be hard working, wage-earning, middle-income caregivers who loved their children and cared about education. They verbally communicated to me that school attendance was important to them. When asked about their hopes, dreams, and goals for their children, participants communicated a parental position of *I just want my children to be happy when they grow up.*

Observations

Parking Lot Snapshots

7:50 AM. The busiest time of morning in the Smithton Elementary School parking lot. It was a 72 degree, mid-spring morning. Skies were largely overcast with numerous, grey, wispy clouds which kept the sun from peeking through. The flag in front of the school gently waved in rhythm with the light winds.

Three busses stopped at the front door within just a few minutes of each other. Approximately 30-35 children per bus scurried down the steps, out of the bus, onto the sidewalk, towards glassed double doors, and into the gymnasium. Multiple vehicles slowly crept around the circle drive in front of the school, stopped in front of a sidewalk leading to the main doors of the school and dropped off one to two children per car. There were about ten to fifteen cars in the circle drive at any given time stopping just long enough for children to safely exit. Some drivers had their car windows down, others did not.

As an observer, I positioned myself in my own parked car in a school parking space in order to blend in and not call attention to myself. With my windows down, I could see and hear a great deal of morning activity. On the radio, blaring from a nearby car, a local DJ reported

current storm warnings across the state. Unknown to passers-by, perched atop a parked, black GMC suburban, a scissor tail flycatcher curiously looked around as if looking for someone or something; perhaps an encroaching storm.

Children, whether getting off the bus or out of a car, carried back-packs and/or lunch boxes; sometimes both. A few children were in shorts, but most in pants. Their combined voices were cheerful and eager while they made their way to the front of the school house.

Although most cars used the circle drive to drop off their children, a handful did not. Between 7:45- 8:05 AM, three to four caregivers chose to park their car in the school's front parking lot so that they could personally walk their child to the front doors of the school. In one instance, a male caregiver pulled into a parking space then got out of his heavily-dusted, black, Silverado pickup, walked around to the passenger side of the truck, then opened the door to assist a small boy wearing overalls and boots. Together, they walked hand-in-hand to the front door of the school. Just shy of the front door, he leaned over to hug the small child, gave a pat on the back, then walked back to his truck while the small child gingerly trekked into the building.

In another instance, a female caregiver wearing a jean jacket and black slacks paired with black flats walked her son to the front of the building. The small, young boy was wearing a grey T-shirt, grey gym shorts, red tennis shoes and carried a cartoon character back-pack. When nearing the front door she leaned over to give him a kiss good-bye. The young boy turned to run, almost dash, to the front doors of the school. His mother turned to walk back to her faded blue, four-door Buick.

Staff members, all female, were posted in strategic location outside of the school. One staff member directed traffic for cars using the circle drive. Though she wasn't wearing an official safety vest, one could tell that she was definitely in charge of traffic flow. Two teachers (or support staff members) were manning the front doors. As students approached, they opened the double doors for the children then closed them once the students were in. To the distant south could be seen another teacher who entered the building in a different set of doors that was located at the far south end of the building. I noticed that only staff members used this set of doors.

Pulling into a marked handicap zone, a slightly worn, older model, maroon four door car parked. A male caregiver, who appeared much older than the other caregivers, departed from the car. He walked around to the passenger side and opened the back door to remove a folded wheelchair. Presumably, a teacher assistant walked out from the school building to meet them at their car. Together, the female staff member and the male caregiver, unfolded the wheelchair, then assisted the young boy out of the car and into a wheel chair. The caregiver and the child both turned towards one another, gazed lovingly at each other, then waved good-bye.

The female staff member navigated the wheelchair towards the building. As the older man pulled away, the child used his right arm as if to turn the wheel of the wheelchair. The wheel chair had orange, plastic, flapping fish on the wheels which twirled in rhythm to the rolling of the rotating wheels. Soon the young boy and female staff member entered the double doors of the school then disappeared out of sight.

Eventually, traffic slowed to two or three cars in the circle drive with fewer children and fewer caregivers entering the building. In the distance, the tardy bell rang. Soon after the tardy bell a somewhat tall, female caregiver, wearing a pink T-shirt and denim jeans, walked a young girl into the building. Sporting a glittery back pack upon her shoulders, the young student wore a pink shirt, black shorts, and black tennis shoes paired with pink anklet socks. Additionally, the accompanying caregiver in the pink T-shirt carried a baby carrier with a yellow blanket draped over it. About half of a minute upon entering the building, the same young woman emerged from the school building with baby carrier in tow, walked back to her car, buckled in the baby, and carefully exited the parking lot.

Front Office Snapshots

Front office observations occurred between 7:45 AM to 8:45 AM, approximately thirty minutes prior to the 8:15 AM tardy bell and thirty minutes after. Smithton's doors to the cafeteria and front office open at 7:45 AM; however, the doors to the school classrooms do not open until 8:10 AM.

Student arrival and morning drop off routines were an ideal opportunity to observe and collect data for student attendance. From a researcher point of view, I observed first hand, what school day attendance looked like from the onset of any given day. More specific to my study, school observations allowed me to hone in on the interrelationship between perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to school attendance and actual school attendance through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Beginning at 7:45 AM, caregivers escorted children to the double door entry where at least one staff member was posted, nearest the cafeteria. From my observation point in the office, I could see through glass windows that overlooked the outside parking lot, bus drop-off, sidewalk, and school entrance. With a slight turn to my left, I saw into the teacher's lounge. Staff members engaged in morning routines such as printing worksheets, checking school mail, greeting colleagues, or making coffee.

Caregivers who had school business to take care of entered the front office while other caregivers called. Present was an overall hive of positive and friendly activity in and among the front office. Parents and caregivers conducted business in the front office in what seemed to be a customary manner. If building wide protocols and routines existed, then they were clearly in place and understood by all patrons.

Miss Sara, the principal's administrative assistant, as well as the school's attendance clerk, is poised and professional. She appeared to be slightly older than most of the caregivers who entered the front office. Staff, parents, and children warmly responded to her.

Miss Sara was stationed behind a very long, light blue, formica-topped counter that stretches the entire length of the front office, which appeared to be at least four to five times larger than the glassed-in foyer entrance to the building. Approximately ten to twelve metal-framed chairs with beige cushioned seats lined the front office glass wall.

Separating the foyer and the main office is a ten foot wide hallway with two wings that lead to classrooms. To the right (north) are four first and four second grade classrooms. To the

left (south), are four pre-kindergarten and four kindergarten classrooms. In the center of both hallways is the main hub, the office.

The front office, seeming to be the center of activity each morning, had many things occurring simultaneously. Various staff members came and went through the office. One entered a door marked speech, another wrote something on a clip board that was setting next to the receptionist, while yet another walked in from one door, looked around, then exited at the back door of the office.

The office's back door opens to a wide hallway directly in front of the library. Since the back walls of the office are glass, the front part of the library is visible from the check-in counter. An adult male entered the building through the foyer, crossed the hallway and then entered the office with a food tray. Miss Sara directed him to deliver the tray to the teachers' lounge.

Behind Miss Sara, to her distant right, was a cornflower blue painted wall. Along this southern wall were four basic, brown, plywood shelves, each with three tiers. Small trinkets, candy, stickers, and toys in colorful, plastic bins filled the metal-framed shelves. Posted on the wall, above the less than glamorous shelves, was a sign that reads *Star Student Store*.

Two young, giggly, female students approached the *Star Student Store*. Their prize selection was not immediate, as indicated by the 15-20 second pause before finally determining just the right selection. Once selected, they hardily clutched their prizes, turned, and once again giggled through toothless smiles, then exited the office.

While physical observations of actual experiences and observable characteristics such as clothing styles and personal expressions, there were still limited amounts of information that

could not be gained. For example, “why” were the girls shopping at the Star Student Store? Why did the man bring in food? What did the staff member write on the clip board?

A female caregiver, wearing a grey ball cap with a blondish pony-tail peeking through the back of her cap, appearing to be in her late twenties, entered into the foyer, crossed the hall, then pushed through the office door. “We almost made it,” she said with an exasperated tone while handing over a green slip of paper to Miss Sara. What was on the green slip of paper? Again, observations do have certain limitations.

A few minutes passed. Dressed in what looked like green plaid pajama bottoms and an oversized white T-shirt, a second female caregiver entered the office while holding the hand of a small, young boy. Her brownish, shoulder-length, tussled hair suggested a hurried morning. She stopped at the counter, let go of his hand, quickly glimpsed at the clock then recorded the time on the sign-in sheet: 8:29 AM.

“Booger,” she yelled without looking directly at him. Booger, the small boy who was holding her hand upon entrance, had run to the other end of the counter where he stood peering at his mother. Booger wore a spider-man t-shirt paired with denim jeans. His spirit seemed to match the superhero displayed on his shirt: enthusiastic and energetic. Shortly thereafter, Miss Sara came from behind the long counter, took Booger by the hand, as if receiving a baton in a relay race, then walked him down the kindergarten hallway and around the corner. Once out of sight, his caregiver turned to leave the building. This particular action seemed routine to all three of them.

Before long, a third female caregiver hastily entered the office with a small boy at her side. At first he seated himself on the chair nearest the door, then he used his arms to prop up his rear-end and swiveled himself to the next chair and the next and the next until he was all the way to the end of the row. Miss Sara called the name of the child as if calling for him during a hide and seek game.

With a helpful and welcoming attitude, she continued conversation with the young boy's caregiver. During the conversation, a middle aged, female staff member made her way to the front office for the specific purpose of retrieving the child. As if on cue, Miss Sara coached the young boy to say goodbye. She said to him, "Say goodbye to your mom." Then the middle aged staff member, the young boy, and his mother exited the office simultaneously. His mother crossed the hallway to the foyer doors, then turned to wave prior to entering the foyer. Endearingly, her son waved back, then continued, in a skipping manner, with his escort down the hall and around the corner until out of sight. Soon after, the principal's voice boomed on the intercom for daily announcements. Those in the office stood still when the principal led the school in a moment of silence and the nation's flag salute.

Telephone Data. An ancillary part of Miss Sara's job is to answer phone calls. The office received eight to ten phone calls during the 7:45 AM – 8:45 AM time frame. Although one sided, relevant information based on the responses of the attendance clerk was gained during phone conversations. For example, during one phone call, Miss Sarah said, "Oh, I am sorry to hear that she is sick. Will her brother be attending today?"

Miss Sara placed down the land line phone receiver. When asked if the boy, who wasn't ill, planned to attend school that day, she responded, "No." Although the phone conversation was one sided, I ascertained from this single observation, that one caregiver of at least two elementary aged children, a boy and a girl, chose to keep home the female child due to illness and keep the male child home due to unknown reasons.

Other phone conversations did not yield the same specificity as the aforementioned phone conversation. Common responses heard were, "yes", "okay", or "uh-huh". Lengthier responses were, "She's sick. Okay. I'll get her excused," or "Thank you for calling".

Themes

This section identifies themes that emerged through data analysis. The identified themes help answer the research questions guiding the study:

- The importance of school attendance
- Knowledge of attendance policies
- Reasons for school absences
- Barriers to school attendance
- Removing barriers to attendance

The Importance of School Attendance

All caregivers but one were emphatic about the importance of school attendance. The one who was not so emphatic seemed to hold a perception that since her prekindergarten child was so young, attendance was not that important. She seemingly held the notion that absences were not

of concern. Other than the one, there was a subtle distinction between those whose children were high attenders compared to those whose children were low attenders.

Each one linked attendance to learning. Some, though not all, cited reasons as to why school attendance was important:

- when a student is absent it is really hard for them to make up work
- making up work is not the same as being there
- if you're not at school then you're not learning
- he learns so much in school... it's important for him to go to school every day
- when children don't attend school regularly, it does affect the knowledge that they're given and the way they learn

Each participant had future hopes and dreams for their child. In fact, caregivers equated current attendance now with a positive future later. To illustrate, when asked what they wanted for their child's future a common response was, *I just want him to be happy*. Participants explained that current school attendance was a must for good grades and in turn good grades throughout the entire prekindergarten through twelfth grade experience was a must in order to graduate high school. High school graduation paved the way for entry into either a trade school or college which in turn would lead to a desired career and that is what caregivers perceived as the key to happiness.

Participant 10 held the strongest opinion of what she wanted for her child after high school. "I want him to go to college so bad. Actually, me and my husband both didn't go to

college, so I pray he does. That's one of my main goals for him is to go to college whenever he's older."

Participant one stated, "I would love for them to find a career that they love and one that is financially awesome." Her statement reflects a caregiver who views college attendance a given. It doesn't need to be discussed because it will happen. To further illustrate her sentiment she says that her daughter, "wants to be a marine biologist and travel the world. To help with that, any money that she gets we put in her account, as per her request, cuz she wants to pay for her own college. If she wants to travel the world then that's fantastic. If she wants to be a marine biologist, fantastic!"

Reasons for School Absence

As described above, each participant held the belief that school attendance was important. However, there were subtle differences in just how adamant caregivers were regarding their opinion as to the level of importance. Some held the belief that school should not, under any circumstances (other than illness), be missed. On the other hand, a few held the belief that there were multiple, acceptable reasons, other than illness, for school to be missed.

Student illness was the number one reason cited for a legitimate reason for a child to miss school. In fact, all twelve participants said that at least one of their elementary aged children had missed school for at least one school day during the prior school year, for illness. Further, all agreed that illness was an acceptable reason to miss school. Other reasons cited as acceptable school absences were funerals and out of town family travel. Two caregivers cited mental health

days as acceptable reasons to be absent from school while another caregiver cited approval to miss school for his birthday.

Participants who kept their children home for illness were adamant that a sick day at home meant a day spent in bed. No playing. Some went further to express that a sick day at home also meant staying home in the evening even if there was a school or church event on that particular day.

Barriers to School Attendance

Participants mentioned several scenarios that they perceived as barriers to school attendance:

- weather
- work schedules
- transportation
- policy changes

Weather. One participant cited cold weather. For example, if a bus picked up Sam (a pseudonym), who lives 1.3 miles from the school, under the old rule, Sam could no longer ride the bus under the new rule. During extreme temperatures, Sam's caregivers may choose to keep him home during cold weather because the only car in the household is being used by a working parent and that caregiver does not want Sam to walk to school in freezing temperatures. So the parent is placed in a position of choosing her child's personal safety and health over school attendance. This bus rule came across as a major barrier to school attendance. The

implementation of the new 1.5 mile bus rule also brought about the strongest negative emotion by the participants who referenced it.

Work Schedules. Since family participation in school events is positively correlated with student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), the way that parents perceive their own participation in their child's school events impacts their child's school attendance. Through the interview process, I learned that all twelve participants believed it was very important for their family to attend school events. However, their perception of the importance of attending school events when compared to their actual attendance at school was inconsistent. Given this point, attendance data reflected that only six of the above referenced twelve participants' children were high attending. One caregiver said that they would try to go to every event that the school had, but this year they had not been able to attend any events due to their work schedules which could be perceived as a barrier to after-hour school events. Another parent described her desire to attend a gingerbread building party with her daughter; however, since the decorating party was held during the morning hours, she was unable to attend because that was her designated sleeping time due to her night owl work hours. She seemed to accept this truth in a matter-of-fact manner. The desire was there but life circumstances prevented her from attending.

Policy Changes. Enough caregivers referenced a second barrier to attending after school events that it resulted in another emerging theme. Three caregivers specifically referenced a new building-level policy that the school implemented for the 2019-2020 school year. In the fall of 2019, each family received a letter from the school outlining their new protocols and procedures

for upgrading security. The letter listed every event that families would be invited to such as parent-teacher conferences, field trips, grandparent luncheon and Book Fair Family Night. Adversely, the school also listed every event that families were no longer able to attend: Halloween Party, Christmas Party, and Valentine's Party. Those who referenced this change in policy expressed great disappointment. In fact, each participant who mentioned this said that those particular events that they were no longer invited to were the very events that they attended the most. Clearly, participants viewed these new rules as barriers to their own participation in school events. As previously stated above, actual student attendance improves when families are actively involved in school events (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Three participants referenced a new bus rule recently made by the district. According to these three participants, the bus used to pick up students who lived one mile or more from the school. The new rule changed the criteria for those who qualified to be picked up by the school bus. The criteria changed from one mile to 1.5 miles which meant that many children who used to ride the bus could no longer ride the bus because their address was too close to the school. Participants did not speak favorably about this bus route change. In fact, they went as far to say that this new rule is a major barrier for other parents to get their children to school.

Transportation. Of the twelve caregivers interviewed, only one family used a bus for transportation to and from school. At least one adult in the household, of the remaining eleven, provided transportation for their children. In two cases, grandparents actively helped provided transportation for their grandchildren; however, it is important to note that in these two cases, the grandparent was not the sole provider of transportation. Family members making adjustments to

their work schedules was referenced frequently by participants. This is important to note because lack of an adult driver in the family on any given day was perceived as a barrier to school attendance.

Removing Barriers to Attendance

Although parents cited several ways that the district can help remove attendance barriers, four were more common than others:

- communication from the school to the parent during an absence
- reinstatement of the one mile bus rule
- educate parents of attendance policies
- institute attendance initiatives

Communication from the school. Of the four actions mentioned above, one of them is and has been in place longer than the others. In fact, parents cited communication from the school to the family as the most favored method of ways the school can help remove attendance barriers. Seven participants referenced a phone call from the school when asked how their child's school addresses absences. All seven perceived the phone call from the school as a positive action to support student attendance. For example, participant #3 believes that the school is "paying attention" because he once forgot to call in when one of his children was sick. "They definitely let me know" that I didn't call in. The school called to, "check in to see if everything was okay." "They really do care about whether students are there or not." In other words, when a caregiver feels that the school cares and is paying attention, then an emotional barrier is removed or a positive communication tool is established in order to prevent a potential barrier.

Participant #2 enumerated this same sentiment by describing her experience with the school's communication when one of her children was sick for more than one day. She explained that after three days of consecutive absences due to illness, a doctor's note was required. She said that the school is really good about calling and saying "Hey. Your child's missed a lot. What's going on and can we help you fix it?"

Reinstatement of one mile bus rule. I learned from three interview participants that the school district used to run their bus routes for any student living within one or more miles from the school. However, at some point within recent years (exact date unknown) the district changed that rule. The rule changed the one mile distance to one-and-a-half miles. Caregivers perceived this as a very negative change. Although it did not impact them personally, it did impact people that they knew and they expressed disappointment for those families impacted. The 1.5 mile bus rule is perceived by many families as a barrier to school attendance.

Attendance policy education. In general, participants expressed a low level of understanding when it came to attendance policies and rules. In essence, participants knew that an attendance rule existed and that students were allowed to be absent only a small percentage of the time, but none knew exactly what that was. For example, when asked about their knowledge of school attendance policies, each participant paused apprehensively "Ummm... I'm not really sure." However, upon reflection in the moment of pause, most participants could explain a certain level of understanding that included, after *so many days* of absences something would be done, but they were not sure what that something would be.

To overcome this particular barrier, four participants indicated that attendance policy education would be beneficial to all parents. They believed that the school should take intentional measures to educate all caregivers as to the attendance policies of the district. If better understood, participants perceived that school attendance would improve thus removing the barrier of being uninformed or poorly educated on the matter.

Attendance initiatives. Caregivers cited attendance initiatives or incentives to encourage attendance as a positive action step that has helped, or at least encouraged, student attendance. For example, a local bank partnered with the elementary school (Smithton Daily Journal, 2020) by challenging elementary aged students to strive for perfect attendance. If, at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, a student met the perfect attendance goal, then s/he would receive a new bicycle (Participant Interview, 2019). The Smithton Daily Journal cited (2020) the principal's note of his appreciation for the extra effort that students made to be in attendance every day. A total of seven students received a bicycle for their perfect attendance up through spring break since the 2019-2020 school year was cut short due to the COVID 19 pandemic. In the same news article, Smithton Bank Marketing Director told the news reporter that the kids, "deserved the recognition for their achievement," and that they could not allow the pandemic to keep the kids from their reward.

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question One

What are family perceptions of the importance of their child's attendance at school?

Each person interviewed, whether or not they had high attending students or low attending students, perceived school attendance as very important. As noted previously, all participants perceived, or at least communicated that they perceived, their children to have high attendance. For example, participant 10 had a low attending student who missed 28 days of school. Yet in her interview she stated, "we have missed school only one or two days when they were sick".

Participants indicated that their perception of their child's school attendance was relevant to their child's learning and their child's success at school. Participant 8 described her understanding of the relevancy of school attendance in terms of future learning and future jobs because, "learning builds on each other for the future." She further stated, "...I think that that's a big impact. Because if you're at school, there's always a possibility to learn. And if you're not at school there's no chance to learn what they're trying to teach you... like I said, it builds on itself, and um, I mean I think to be successful you attend school or some type of learning environment."

Participant 4 echoed many of the same sentiments as participant 8. She recognized a link between, "showing up now" and being successful in the world of work because it, "teaches them right off the bat that you have to be responsible and you have to show up because it is expected."

Each of the twelve caregivers also communicated that they believed that their child's school attendance would impact his/her future in high school, college, and/or the workforce. Six caregivers made specific reference to their child's future world of work. For example, Participant 11 said, "You have to be at work and school to be successful in life." She further explained that if a child is allowed to be absent from school year after year then the child is, "going to think it's acceptable behavior." Once that child enters the world of work, s/he will, "end up job-hopping and going from job to job to job because jobs don't want to keep someone around who misses all the time."

Research Question Two

Do perceptions regarding the importance of attendance differ between families of high attending students and low attending students? If so, how?

In essence, perceptions regarding the importance of attendance did not differ between families of high attending students and low attending students. However, upon closer analysis, there was a slight difference in the adamancy of attendance. For example, the parent of a high attending student explained that her own parents were very strict about attendance. She could recall very few times throughout her school career when she did not attend school. Her childhood experiences carried over into her parenting experience as she insisted that her children attend school unless they were truly ill or had a family emergency like a death in the family.

Another participant stated that school attendance is, “a big deal at our house.” She likened school attendance to employees attending work on a regular basis. “It is a big stepping stone. Like employers or other people are going to look to see if you can be at a certain place at a certain time. Plus, if you’re not at school you’re not learning.”

A third participant explained to me what she tells her child about school and compares her child’s work at school to her work at her job. “This is your job. I have to go to work. You have to go to work. This is your future.” Her statement indicates her own perception of linking her child’s early school attendance to the child’s future.

One caregiver elaborated on ways that missing school negatively impacted home life. She recognized the continuous cycle of learning and what happens when that cycle gets interrupted. She stated that they need to go to school, “so that their learning can keep going so that they don’t miss something because as they’re (teachers) teaching them... we aren’t quite sure what to do.”

The homework, “didn’t come with directions. It didn’t come with a book.” My daughter said that, “it was science, but it actually looked like math... I did not do good in science and if that has anything to do with it then I have no idea.” We tried to help her but, “had to send her back to school with it (homework) because she wasn’t taught how to do it...” since she missed that particular lesson during her absence. “And then the day she went back they didn’t teach her that lesson” so there is a learning gap. “Yes. It is very frustrating.”

Ray (a pseudonym) explained the importance of school attendance like this, “I believe that school attendance is important because there’s so much that is being taught every day. Something new. It’s a foundation for what’s being taught later. If they miss a day and try to make it up, it’s hard. Making it up is not the same as being there.” Further, “they don’t like to stay home because they know that they have to make up work. It’s just hard to try to go back and make up a lesson that already been taught.”

On the other hand, all participants recognized or supported the notion that a family emergency or a genuine illness was a legitimate reason for not attending school.

Interestingly enough, three caregivers of low attending students indicated that they were somewhat more lenient with requiring their child to attend school. They held a belief that there are other reasons for missing school aside from a family emergency or a genuine illness. For example, one parent allowed her child to stay home on his birthday as well as another “day or two” for personal or mental health reasons. The second caregiver indicated that if one of her three children got sick at school, then the other two students were checked out at the same time as their sibling who had taken ill in order to go home due to transportation issues. The third caregiver described a situation where all three children missed several days of school when one family member had to travel out of town. She explained that they did not have family in town and did not have friends who were close enough to provide care for her children while they traveled out of town.

Yes, perceptions regarding the importance of attendance differ between families of high attending students and low attending students as described above. Though the difference was marginal, certain caregivers made no apologies for their personal reasons, such as birthdays, out of town travel, and mental health days, to keep students home or to support their non-attendance.

Research Question Three

What are family perceptions of barriers to their children's attendance?

Three common themes surfaced as to what families perceive as barriers to their children's attendance: district policy changes to public school bus transportation, doctor's appointments and/or illness, and lack of knowing or understanding the school's attendance policies.

There is overwhelming agreement that families perceive lack of public school transportation as a barrier. To explain in greater detail, four parents referenced a change in bus policy that the district made a few years ago. At one time, buses picked up students who lived one mile or more from the school. The district changed its policy a few years ago to 1.5 miles or more instead of 1 mile. Parents who cited this as a barrier demonstrated strong verbal and non-verbal disapproval when discussing this. The volume of their voices increased, their shoulders raised and their facial expressions changed from soft and relaxed to tightened and firm when expressing disapproval of the bus policy change.

Parents who expressed disappointment in the bus policy change held a common belief that elementary aged students who live between one to one-and-a-half miles from the school

miss school more often than their peers who live within walking distance of less than six blocks or those who ride a school bus. They cite personal experiences with their own children or friends and acquaintances.

Participant 9 explained that she had a friend who lived nearly 1.5 miles from the school. Her friend's children used to take the bus to school. However, once the new bus policy was implemented, those children were no longer able to ride the school bus. Instead, they had to rely on personal transportation or had to walk. In this particular instance, her friend's children would not attend school on rainy days or cold weather days because they were a single vehicle family which meant that the children had to walk to school.

Participant 4 confirmed this. She stated that there have been times that she has kept her children home when the temperatures were excessively cold or weather conditions were rainy. In her case, she had a car but explained that it was broken down most of the time which meant that the kids had to walk about 1.3 miles to school. In her opinion, she chose safety over school attendance.

Every participant cited illness or doctor's appointments as a barrier to school attendance. Although they recognized that this was not particularly a school issue, one participant mentioned a desire for the school and the local medical professionals to work together in order to schedule appointments for later in the afternoon so that school was not missed.

One particular note of interest was the scenario of children being late to school because of “the trains”. I learned that this community was geographically divided by a train track that crossed numerous intersections in town. Participant 5 stated, “The trains. The trains will hold you up... I see a lot of kids walk... and are left to tend to themselves.” She explained that students in cars, as well as those on foot, who had to wait for a train to cross were often tardy. For this particular parent, she believed that a certain number of tardies were equivalent to a single absence, but was unsure as to how many tardies that was. For her, the untimely meeting of train is a barrier to school attendance.

Research Question Four

How does Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory explain the interrelationship between family perceptions regarding the importance of school attendance, barriers to attendance, and actual attendance at school?

As Bronfenbrenner’s theory suggests, the child is in the center of his own ecological system (See Figure 2). This study, through parent interviews and school observations, brought visibility of particular interactions of the child and those within his exosystem, the surrounding neighborhood and the school district; interactions of those within his mesosystem such as teachers and support staff and even peers; and interactions of those in within his microsystem, caregivers and family members.

District influence on student attendance. I observed the child's macrosystem, his school, the school culture, school rules, and surrounding social conditions which provided insight into the district's influence on student attendance. For example, I observed a caregiver participate in the well-established sign-in protocol for her child after the tardy bell had sounded. Human interactions included those of the caregiver, staff member, and the child. The human interactions were being influenced by social norms, school culture, and school rules. This is an illustrative example of how the district influences student attendance.

School influence on student attendance. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory places the child at the center of his/her world, that is, within the center of his microsystem. The child's microsystem in this study were *immediate connections*: caregivers, school staff, and teachers. Immediate connections had a direct impact on student attendance in various ways. Some caregivers cited the school's perfect attendance incentive as something that influenced his attendance. For examples, one caregiver described her child as being motivated to attend school every day in order to win the bicycle that was to be provided to every student with perfect attendance.

Caregivers were asked what the school did to encourage attendance. Responses ranged from, "nothing that I know of," to incentives such as perfect attendance parties. Participant 11 stated that the schools, "try to make the kids want to come to school" and that they, "try to make things interesting and fun for the kids." He reasoned that, "The more fun ya have, the more you want to be somewhere." He took it one step further. "... but also, if you're missing you gotta pay

the price, like you could end up in detention... and of course there is also the price that if you miss too many days you get to stay in that grade”.

Two participants referenced two different types of communication from the school that influenced attendance: a telephone call and a letter mailed to the home. One participant cited telephone calls. “If you’re not there, you get a phone call”. She felt like the phone call from the school demonstrated that they cared.

A second participant said, “I don’t know. I mean I guess that stupid letter to my house telling me that she’s missed so many days... and even if I give them a doctor’s note... which most of them are all covered... I still get that stupid letter. But there’s nothin’ I can do about it.”

Each of the two participants had two very different opinions regarding the school’s communication with them in reference to their child’s attendance. Whether positive or negative, the school’s actions influenced student attendance.

All participants linked learning to attendance. “If he’s not there, he can’t learn,” is one example of a caregiver’s perception of linking her child’s attendance to his learning. A different participant said, “If they are continually missing school then they fall behind in class” while another stated, “If she doesn’t go to school she loses. She misses out.” Mary, (pseudonym) said, “Well, being there is huge because she’s learning every day. It’s showing every day... So, she’s growing because she’s there.”

Caregiver influence on student attendance. When the child interacts with his family, there exists a bi-directional dynamic that is made up of certain types of behaviors. For example, when the school hosts an evening event for families, there are certain types of behaviors demonstrated by the child and his family. One such behavior could be an *attitude*, whether positive or negative, towards school. The child is then influenced by attitudes of family members. An early speculation in this study was that if parents valued school attendance, then their children would value school attendance, thus influencing actual school attendance. Findings disclosed that caregiver influence on student attendance had a greater impact than the school or district’s influence.

Doctor’s appointments and student illness were the largest determining factor for school attendance.

Table 4

Parent Perception of School Attendance vs. Actual School Attendance

Participant	Perceived School Attendance	Actual School Attendance Days Missed
1	High	High/0 days missed
2	High	High/2 days missed
3	High	Low/11 days missed
4	High	Low/12 days missed

5	High	High/3 days missed
6	High	High/ 0 days missed
7	High	Low/15 days missed
8	High	Low/24 days missed
9	High	High/2 days missed
10	High	Low/25 days missed
11	High	Low/ 24 days missed
12	High	High/ 3 days missed

Note. Parent perceptions are as stated in interviews based on the 2019-2020 school year. High attendance = 0-3 days of absence per school year; Low attendance = 10 or more days of absence per school year.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students who are chronically absent are more likely than other students to drop out of school. Family and Community involvement activities... and community partnership practices can significantly decrease chronic absenteeism.

Sheldon/Epstein, 2017

Chapter VI concludes the study with a discussion section, a section for implications for theory and practice, and then closes with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The theoretical framework utilized in this study was Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), fundamental built-in qualities of a child and his environment interact to influence, shape, govern, or determine how he will grow, advance, and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Bronfenbrenner's model, the child is at the center of his own *world* or ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the child's microsystem, relationships or interactions with his immediate surroundings, such as family, school, and neighborhood, can be found (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In this study, I recognized an overarching premise that emerged through the data analysis of participant responses that clearly reinforce the model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory: a child's growth and development is heavily influenced by his external influences. More specifically, the two main external influences are caregivers and the school.

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, caregivers are part of the child's environment, or microsystem. As a researcher, I had the opportunity to interview caregivers who directly impacted the child's growth on a daily basis. Further, I had the opportunity to observe an environment, the child's school, which directly impacted the child's growth year after year. When combined, caregiver influence and school influence, were the two central and predominant sources in the child's microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model is distinctively set apart as a nesting system of external influences. In fact, it is the concept of nesting rather than a linear or hierarchical concept, which led me to select this theory for my study. Nesting is a coherent method or approach that groups like concepts together with the ability to flow from one to another smoothly and fluidly without boundaries. For example, a child awakes each morning in his home environment which is part of his microsystem due to its immediacy. His home environment is then nested into his school environment, the mesosystem, which is yet another part of the entire ecological system. His mesosystem is beyond the immediate.

As he transitions from one environment to the next, from microsystem to mesosystem to exosystem, he does so seamlessly since there are no specific or solid boundaries that delineate each system. Notice that in this scenario there is no hierarchy, nor is there a linear method to the

child's experience of his world. Instead one part of the child's world naturally flows into another part of the child's world because one is nested within another.

Another important feature of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is the concept of bi-directional influence. For example, the child's interactions with his caregiver at home and his interactions with staff members at school create a set of bi-directional, external behaviors that are systemically part of his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is within these bi-directional behaviors and interactions throughout the child's day that the child's growth is influenced. For instance, one participant provided multiple reasons for her child's 24 absences. During that school year the child experienced all 24 of those absences; therefore, his own created perceptions of the importance of school attendance was influenced by those experiences.

In the same manner, the child experienced life at school after each of the 24 absences which yielded a different type of experience than the experiences he had at home. Likely, the child's caregiver and the child's teacher held different attitudes and demonstrated different behaviors toward the child's absences. Consequently, the bi-directional set of interactions between child and caregiver as well as the interactions between the child and the teacher influence the child's growth, perceptions, and attitudes.

If I could make changes to Bronfenbrenner's Theory, based on the findings in my study, I would add a component within the model that allows for examination of ways that external influences act as a potential catalyst for internal influences such as mental and emotional growth. Consider the example of a child who observed, during his elementary school years, external

caregiver behaviors who demonstrated a lack of interest in school attendance. Over time, would the child adopt the same external behaviors and the same internal opinions or viewpoints as the caregiver? I pose this thought and question because it was made apparent to me that caregivers had very strong opinions relating to school attendance. Their external behaviors during the interviews, such as increased voice volume, raised shoulders, facial expression changes, and changed voice inflection or tone, indicated to me their level of seriousness or priority given to school attendance or school absence. Does the child internalize the external behaviors of the caregiver? If so, how and to what degree?

Findings in this study aligned naturally with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. To show you what I mean, I provide some relevant comments from the participants that illustrate the bi-directional influence component of his theory.

- I take him and pick him up
- On "off" days brother will get him as a surprise
- My husband's Grandpa likes to take them to school every morning
- They have to be really sick or have a really good reason, like a funeral, to miss
- If you're (the child) not there, you're not going to learn anything
- I make 'em go every day. It's mandatory in my book.

These quotes demonstrate caregiver behaviors that directly influence a child's school attendance. In essence, caregiver action influences the child's action.

It should be noted that findings from my study did not contradict any part of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Since his theory is a nesting model consisting of five levels of external influence in the life of a child, any dynamic experienced in the course of a child's day was experienced in at least one or more of those levels and moved fluidly from one level to another.

In this study, it became clear that caregiver attitudes toward school attendance influence the child thus impacting the child's own growth and development. It is these caregiver attitudes that are *conditions and circumstances* as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's organizational model of a child's development. For example, according to participant data analysis, the development of the child's growth cycle and the development of the child's opinions and attitudes towards school attendance are directly influenced by his caregiver. Consequently, the child grows up believing that school attendance is or is not important based on his caregiver's sets of actions, behaviors, attitudes, and opinions. When the child graduates high school and enters the world of work or post-secondary education he carries these sets of beliefs and opinions with him. Therefore, the child's growth and development cycle within the influences of his own micro and macrosystem(s) lead him to value (or not value) school attendance. In the words of one caregiver, attitudes toward school attendance is, "engrained at this point in life; therefore the child is (*or is not*) successful in life" (Participant 11, 2019). Therefore, through logical reasoning based on Bronfenbrenner's theory, student attitudes towards school attendance are influenced by caregiver attitudes towards school attendance.

The findings from this study indicate that there are some similarities and some differences, at the elementary school level, in the way that parents of high attending students and parents of low attending students perceive the importance of school attendance. To illustrate the point, I reference quotes from participant interviews. For instance, the caregivers of high attending students held attitudes towards school attendance that were demonstrated by remarks such as, “it’s (school attendance) mandatory in my book,” or there has to be, “a really good reason to miss.” Now, let’s compare their statements to the statements of participants who had low attending students. “If I have to pull out one kid then I pull out the other two,” or “...when I get a call from the school and they ask ‘why are you constantly missing class’ and then we have to get it fixed.” As one can see by the above remarks, there are some similarities and some differences in the way that parents of high attending students and parents of low attending students perceive the importance of school attendance.

The nuances of their responses may be subtle or implied, but the differences are clear. Again, the caregiver attitudes as illustrated above, are the conditions and circumstances of the child’s microsystem as described in Bronfenbrenner’s five level organizational model of external influences in the life of a child. These examples characterize how the child (self) is at the center of the circumstance and is nested within the influences of those surrounding him.

In conclusion, one of the most important findings of this study was that parents of low attending students still perceived their child’s attendance as satisfactory. Let’s segue for a moment. In a 2007 report by Romero and Lee, absenteeism rates correlated with income levels:

the lower the family income, the higher the absenteeism rate. Findings in this study support the notion of this particular correlation.

Participants in this study who had transportation problems due to a limited number of vehicles in the family, or limited means to make auto repairs, could be considered lower income (although this study did not delineate income levels). The very participants who had transportation challenges and perceived their personal transportation challenge as a barrier to attend school, did indeed have elementary aged children who were considered chronically absent. However, they still held a perception that their child was high attending. I found this phenomenon particularly interesting. There seemed to be a held belief that if there was a logical excuse for an absence, then that absence *didn't really count* against the child, therefore, the child still had very good attendance. While no caregiver came right out and said that, it is through logical reasoning based on Bronfenbrenner's theory that I arrive at this conclusion.

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for research, theory, and practices. Implications are described and depicted below.

Implications for Research

The implications for research are the contributions to the larger body of student attendance research and the broadening and expansion of informative research about chronic absenteeism. Since chronic absenteeism data has only been collected on a national level since

2014 (CDRC, 2014), the body of research is far from saturated (McCluskey, Bynum, and Patching, 2004; Moinar, 2012). Further, the body of research that includes elementary aged students who rely on caregivers to get them to school is minimal and not clearly understood (Corville & Smith; 1998; Garry, 1996; Nauer, 2016; Sahin, Arseven, & Kilec, 2016).

This study has brought new information to the field of elementary aged student attendance and chronic absenteeism research. The most important new information come from the voices of the parents. By engaging directly with caregivers, the study was able to explore the *why*. That is, the caregivers' perceived reasons as to why their children, in particular elementary aged children, are unable to attend school. Further, through this study, I am contributing to the larger body of knowledge, by bringing to the forefront the actual perceptions of caregivers. Caregiver perceptions matter. Their perceptions offer enlightenment to this body of research which could in turn aid policy makers in their decision making as to ways to improve student attendance.

Implications for Theory

Because attendance has gained considerable attention from educational leaders, utilization of Bronfenbrenner's theory may provide new knowledge and understanding in the fields of student attendance and chronic absenteeism. Inasmuch, the implications for understanding theoretical underpinnings could positively influence student attendance of elementary aged students. Furthermore, understanding caregiver perceptions of barriers to student attendance could, theoretically, broaden or deepen our understanding of elementary-aged

chronic absenteeism while utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. For example, as referenced above, nesting is the aspect of Bronfenbrenner's theory that is most important for fully understanding the child's relationships or interactions with his immediate surroundings such as family and school. Understanding the child's growth and development within a nesting system deepens our overall understanding of his day-to-day experiences which in turn deepens our understanding of student attendance at the elementary school level. With new understanding and new knowledge, new policies and initiatives may be developed to bring our nation's level of chronic absenteeism out of crisis mode.

Implications for Practice

This study has implications for national, state, district, and local policy makers, educational leaders, and school families. National leaders and policy makers can benefit from understanding caregivers' perceptions of barriers to school attendance. Adding such understanding to their already existing database of quantifiable attendance facts, could influence policies to assist caregivers with enhanced methods of getting their children to school daily and on time. State educators and policy makers may benefit from the same types of understandings. Considerations should be made for the unique situations and populations for each state as it applies to understanding barriers to school attendance.

Local educators and policy makers should carefully examine their own student population and seek to understand what their local families perceive as barriers to school attendance. For example, in this study, local families perceived the school bus transportation

change, as referenced in Chapter 5, as a barrier to school attendance. The local board made this decision but may not have sought family insight to inform their decision making. If the current school board gathered information from families who live in the 1.0 – 1.5 mile range from the school, would they reconsider their bus transportation policy? This is a classic case of how a collaboration or partnership between families and school board members could benefit students and positively impact student attendance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for further research are provided as reasonable, viable, and practical extensions of this study. My first recommendation is to apply this same study to another district with opposite school size compared to the one in this study. Instead of interviewing caregivers whose children attend one elementary school in a small, rural district, the researcher could interview caregivers whose children attend one elementary school in a large metropolitan district.

A second recommendation is to apply this study to two different elementary schools in a larger (at least six different elementary schools) school district: a high poverty/low performing school and an affluent/ high performing school. Observations and interviews could be conducted in the same manner as was conducted in this study. For example, observations of the parking lots and front offices of both a high poverty/low performing school and an affluent/high performing school could be conducted just like in my study. Are caregiver perceptions of barriers to school

attendance similar when examining perceptions of participants from both populations? This could be an overarching research question for the study.

A third recommendation is to consider a mixed methods approach by utilizing a cross-sectional survey. “Survey research is popular because of its versatility, efficiency, and generalizability,” (McMillan, James, 2008). Since the purpose of this particular survey is to describe the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of respondents, a written, cross-sectional survey in the form of a digital questionnaire could be used. This particular cross-sectional survey would be designed to study a phenomenon, school attendance at an elementary school or schools, as it occurs at a given time.

Further, it has a high desirability factor due to its low cost and its ability to reach a large number of respondents in a short amount of time. Plus, it is easy to use for both the researcher and the respondent (in this case, the caregiver). However, the most important feature of survey research is its *value*. Survey research has the capacity to yield fairly accurate generalizable conclusions about large populations through probability sampling from a particular population (McMillan, James, 2008). For instance, a researcher could get fairly accurate generalizations from a public school population of 41,000 students, such as the size of Tulsa Public Schools, through some type of probability sampling. Once determined, the digital questionnaire would be sent only to the sample group.

Data from the cross-sectional survey would provide additional perspectives of caregivers resulting in new knowledge gained through providing the survey to all parents, or at least a larger

number of parents, at any given elementary school. Finally, a digital survey is appealing to the participant because of its anonymity and its short requirement of time.

If a written, quantitative, cross-sectional survey is used in a mixed methods approach, I recommend that the researcher use a web-based platform such as Google Forms. Once the researcher constructs the survey, it is easily distributed to participants' emails with the simple click of the *share* button found in Google Forms. Correspondingly, it is easy to use and distribute and indeed the software automatically tracks the data responses in real time. In fact, if using Google Forms, it will provide the researcher with multiple views of the data by providing different types of visual graphs such as color coded pie charts or bar graphs.

If given the opportunity to conduct this study again, I would add to my participant base a principal, at least three teachers, and a school resource officer. Each of these positions holds a unique perspective when it comes to student absences. These participants would be provided a modified set of interview questions unique to their positions. For example, I would construct questions that would solicit the perceptions of these key stakeholders. How does a principal perceive student absences in relationship to truancy and chronic absenteeism? How do teachers perceive or experience the impact on classroom instruction when a student is absent? How does a school resource officer perceive student absences at the elementary school level in relationship to his perception of the same students in their futures as juveniles and as adults?

Whether it be a qualitative study or a mixed methods study, both types of research are beneficial to better understanding the phenomenon of caregiver perceptions of barriers to

elementary school attendance. As referenced in the literature review, the literature about this phenomenon is far from being saturated. There is a great need for more studies like this in order for school leaders and policy makers to make improved and informed decisions that could assist and support caregivers by removing school attendance barriers.

Summary

The epistemological perspective guiding this study was constructivism. Knowledge was constructed by learning in the reflection upon the experience (Merriam, 1998) which is a key component to the constructivist learning theory. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was the theoretical framework utilized to frame the study. Qualitative inquiry served as the methodology guiding the study.

Chapter II reviewed the literature in regards to a topic that has been largely overlooked (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Nauer, 2016; Romero & Lee, 2007; Chang & Sullivan, 2016), in education research: chronic absenteeism of elementary aged students. Literature established the importance of school attendance and examined school attendance facts at a national and state level. Additionally, literature consistently linked excessive absences to lower achievement (Gottfried, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008; Chang & Sullivan, 2016).

Chapter III described the qualitative case study methodology selected. Qualitative inquiry framed the interviews, observations, and analysis of the data. It allowed me, the primary research tool, to pick up on subtle nuances or underlying meanings that could not be captured in a

quantitative study. Further, the case study design encouraged exploration of new ideas and study of details that could provide for a deeper understanding of the case. Finally, Chapter III established interviews and observations as the primary data collection tools.

Chapter IV presented the data of the school district, the school itself, the population and sample of the study and the school's surrounding neighborhoods. Smithton's student body profile was presented along with the profiles of the twelve participants. Also presented were the participant criteria and the participant selection process in conjunction with data analysis.

Chapter V presented the findings. First, I presented my impressions as the researcher. I included my impressions of the district, neighborhood, school, and the participants. Observations, both in the school building and out of the school building during student arrival were presented. In accordance with the established methodology, themes that emerged during the study that could help answer the research questions were presented. Findings supported the original notion that caregiver perceptions of barriers to school attendance correlated closely with actual school attendance. In essence, those caregivers who had high attending students did not perceive any barriers to student attendance. Their children were in attendance no matter what. Yet those caregivers who had low attending students perceived multiple barriers to school attendance such as bad weather, transportation challenges, sick family members, personal days because they *felt like it*, or out of town travel.

Additional findings revealed that although all caregivers perceived school attendance as important, the perceptions of parents with low attending students did not translate to high

attendance for their own children. Participants # 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, & 11 had low attending students. The number of days missed was 11, 10, 14.5, 24, 25 & 18 respectively (See Table 3). It should be noted that the attendance data in Table 3 was for the school 2019-2020 school year which was cut short in March of 2020 due to the alleged CoVid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the numbers of days missed for the low attending students would likely have been increased by ten percent or more if the students had been in school the entire school year. That means that some students would have missed at least 30 school days during the entire year.

Chapter VI presented discussion of my findings through Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework alongside pertinent literature. Implications for theory and research were discussed and recommendations for future research were made.

In conclusion, literature supports the notion that any absence from school is a lost opportunity for learning (Chang, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2006; Epstein, 2002; Meeder & Voskuil, 2016; Romero & Lee, 2007). Caregivers in this study echoed the same parallel belief that when a child is absent from school, learning opportunities are lost. Collectively, they voiced that a full day of in person learning at school is unequivocally and indisputably the optimal method of gaining knowledge when compared to *making up* work when absent. Ultimately, "when we work to ensure that students are in school every day and receive the supports they need to learn and thrive," we can then use education as the great equalizer – "a force that can overcome differences in privilege and background" (United States Department of Education, 2016). As an academic researcher and through this study, I am providing key stakeholders

additional information in the field of student attendance for use in their endeavor to support elementary school families who perceive barriers to school attendance. With strong family/school partnerships in place, student attendance rates will increase thus providing improved learning opportunities for all.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in Research Study Titled:

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: CAREGIVER PERCEPTION OF BARRIERS TO CHILDREN'S
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Dear Research Study Participant,

Greetings! I am writing to inform you of a research study being conducted by me, Andrea D. Rains, an Oklahoma State University Doctoral Candidate. I am conducting interviews with caregivers of elementary aged students as part of a research study to increase my understanding of the value that caregivers place on school attendance and barriers to school attendance as perceived and experienced by caregivers coupled with their dispositions, attitudes, and perspectives about student attendance.

As a caregiver of an elementary aged student in our local region of Oklahoma, you are in an ideal position to provide to me valuable first-hand information from your own perspective. The interview will take about thirty minutes. For my research, I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on being a caregiver who is responsible for getting his/her child to school every day and on time. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. There are no right or wrong answers. What is important are your opinions. After the interview, I may contact you at a later date to clarify

certain points. All information that you provide is confidential and your name will not appear in any publication related to this study.

A small token of appreciation will be provided to you upon completion of the interview. You will receive a \$10.00 gift card to a local eatery. Your participation is valuable as it adds to my research and findings of caregiver perspectives. Further, your participation could lead to greater public understanding of student chronic absenteeism as it relates to student achievement in Oklahoma Public Education. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or penalty. While there are no anticipated risks for participating or withdrawing at any time, any potential risk will be made known to you.

If you are willing to participate please suggest two dates and times that suit your schedule. We will designate a meeting place for the interview once we have established the date and time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

You may contact me, the principal investigator, at the following address, phone number, and/or emails should you desire to discuss participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Andrea Rains, OSU Doctoral Candidate, 3418 Live Oak Lane, Stillwater, OK 74075; (405) 880-4931 or andrea.d.rains@gmail.com or andrea.rains@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer, you may contact the IRB office at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. The principal investigator's advisor may also be contacted: Dr. Katherine Curry, Oklahoma State University; 306 Willard Hall, in Stillwater, OK 74078 or 2436 Mail Hall

in Tulsa, OK or (918) 520-9217 or katherine.curry@okstate.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Most Sincerely,

Andrea Rains

Appendix B

Adult Consent Form

Oklahoma State University

PROJECT TITLE:

Chronic Absenteeism: Caregiver Perception of Barriers to Children's School Attendance.

INVESTIGATOR(S):

Andrea D. Rains, BS, MS, Doctoral Candidate; Oklahoma State University

PURPOSE:

This study involves research that will examine the caregiver perspective of elementary aged children who are chronically absent as defined by the Oklahoma State Department of Education and Accountability. Subjects who have elementary aged students who attend Oklahoma Public Schools will be asked to participate in research because they are the primary target group of this research. This study will also provide additional knowledge and understanding about chronic absenteeism to educators and policy makers for purposes of informed decision making in order to reduce chronic absenteeism.

PROCEDURES:

For the interview portion of this study the steps are, upon agreement and completion of the Adult Consent Form, the participant will participate in a recorded interview with the principal investigator. Questions asked will solicit their opinions, attitudes, perspectives, and understandings of chronic absenteeism, student attendance, barriers to school attendance, and the importance of school attendance as it relates to their child's school, their child, and their families. The interview is designed to last about an hour but will be no more than 90 minutes. For the observation portion of this study, the principal investigator will observe a front office setting of an elementary school during the morning arrival hour while the attendance clerk fields phone calls and answers questions from caregivers who appear face-to-face. Observations will also include morning student drop-off and afternoon student pick-up whether it be by car or bus. Of course, these observations will take place only with the express permission from the principal.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:

There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:

Participants have the opportunity to express their unique voice and perspectives as it relates specifically to student attendance, chronic absenteeism, and their own perceptions of barriers to school attendance of their elementary aged children. Further, their opinions could potentially benefit educators and policy makers. This study will also benefit public school practitioners who

hold their own perceptions of student attendance and are faced with influencing school attendance. Additionally, local boards of education who are charged with making or revising student attendance policies could benefit.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include information that will identify the participant. Research records will be stored on a password protected electronic device in a locked office. Only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. All interview responses, along with all data, will be destroyed three years after the study has been completed. Any or all data from this research will be reported in my dissertation. Additionally, data could be reported in professional journal articles; however, at no time will personally identifiable information be used in the professional journal writings.

COMPENSATION:

As a token of appreciation, each participant will receive a \$10.00 gift card to a local eatery. The gift card will be presented to the participant at the conclusion of the interview.

CONTACTS:

You may contact me, the principal investigator, at the following address, phone number, and/or email(s) should you desire to discuss participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Andrea Rains, OSU Doctoral Candidate, 3418 Live Oak Lane, Stillwater,

OK 74075; (405) 880-4931 or andrea.d.rains@gmail.com or andrea.rains@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer, you may contact the IRB office at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. The principal investigator's advisor may also be contacted: Dr. Katherine Curry, Oklahoma State University; 306 Willard Hall, in Stillwater, OK 74078 or 2436 Mail Hall in Tulsa, OK or (918) 520-9217 or katherine.curry@okstate.edu.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and subjects may discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or penalty. Any risks to subjects that might occur due to their withdrawal will be made clear to each participant. Reasons for the subject's participation to be terminated may include breach of confidentiality, sudden or unexpected illness, moving to a distance that makes communication unreasonable, and/or any other unforeseen circumstance as determined by the principal investigator.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:

I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and the benefits of my participation. I also understand and agree to the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read and fully understand this consent form.

I sign it freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Interview questions for participants

1. Briefly describe yourself and your family's living situation.
2. How many children do you have and where do they attend school?
3. How do your children get to and from school?
4. What is your understanding of the school's attendance policy?
5. Describe a typical day for your child when s/he is at school.
6. Describe a typical day when your child is absent from school.
7. Is school attendance important for your child and why?
8. On average, how many days a month does your child miss from school?
9. On days that your child is absent from school, what is it that keeps your child from attending.
10. What do you do when your child (or children) don't attend school?
11. In what ways does your child's school encourage attendance?
12. In what ways does your child's school address absences?
13. Have these efforts by the school helped or hindered your child's attendance.
14. Is there something that your child's school could do better in order to help parents and

caregivers get their children to school daily?

15. In what ways does your family participate in your child's school experience?
16. How is your child's learning impacted by his/her attendance at school?
17. What, if any, concerns do you have about your child's school attendance?
18. In what ways can your child's school help you in relation to school attendance?
19. What are your hopes/dreams for your child's future?
20. What are your perceptions about ways that your child's school attendance now impacts or affects his/her future later?
21. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share in relationship to school attendance?

VITA

Andrea Denise Dolezal-Rains

Candidate for the Degree of Education Administration

Doctor of Education

Thesis: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: CAREGIVER PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO CHILDREN'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Major Field: Education Administration

Biographical:

Education:

- Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Education Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2021.
- Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Curriculum, Instruction, and Educational Leadership at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, 2001.
- Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with a Field of Concentration in Language Arts at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 1987.

Experience:

- Classroom Teacher for Pre-Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, & 5th grades from 1987 to 2005.
Skyline Elementary School, Stillwater, OK
- Building Principal for Pre-Kindergarten to 5th grades from 2005 to 2017
Sangre Ridge Elementary School & Skyline Elementary, Stillwater, OK
- Building Principal for Junior High grades 7th & 8th from 2017 - 2021
Perry Junior High School, Perry, OK
- Director of Professional Development from 2017 to Current

