The Social Construction of School Refusal:

An Exploratory Study of School Personnel’s Perceptions

by

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL REFUSAL:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL’S PERCEPTIONS

Anna M. Torrens Salemi

ABSTRACT

Despite a multi-disciplinary, international literature, little research has drawn attention to the phenomenon of school refusal within the school. Most research on school refusal follows a positivist paradigm, focusing on the student, instead of examining the role of schools. Using a qualitative design and a social constructionist framework, this study explored how school personnel perceive school refusal, focusing on the social interactions, processes, and perceptions that construct their understanding. The study was conducted in a large school district in the Southeastern United States.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with school personnel at the middle school (N=42), high school (N=40), and district level (N=10). Interviews at the school level included assistant principals, school psychologists, social workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, teachers, attendance office staff, and school resource officers. The district level interviews included personnel in departments related to guidance, psychology, school health services, and social work. Observational data was collected within the schools selected for interviews (N=10). Thirty-eight out of 68 middle and high school principals in the school district completed the Survey of School Refusal.

Findings suggest that school personnel rarely use the terminology set forth by the professional literature to describe the spectrum of school refusal. Further, analysis
revealed that personnel delineate students who refuse school according to their own
categorizations formed through day-to-day experiences with students. Personnel’s
constructions of school refusal differed based on legitimacy of the reason for refusal,
motivation for refusal, grade level, and barriers, which were physical, mental, emotional,
social, and societal in nature. Overarching dynamics of typifications of students included
parental control, parental awareness, student locus of control, blame, and victim status.
These typifications influence how personnel react to students they encounter, particularly
in deciding who needs help versus punishment presenting very real implications for
students.

The findings from this exploratory qualitative study make a significant
contribution to this literature. The findings support the use of social constructionism in
understanding school personnel’s construction of school refusal. Implications for
education, public health, and school health practice are presented and include
recommendations for policy, training, prevention, early intervention, and future research.
CHAPTER I:
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The phenomenon of school refusal occurring in schools falls within the scope of public health and the role of public health in school settings. School refusal, also referred to as separation anxiety, school phobia, or school avoidance, is a term that encompasses an array of reasons and explanations for the avoidance of school attendance by children and youth. Most of the contemporary literature has cited the preference for the term school refusal because it recognizes the heterogeneity of the problem. School refusal, however it is described, incites much distress among students, families, and school personnel (King & Bernstein, 2001).

The general definition used in this study describes school refusal as “student refusal to attend school for various unexplained reasons” (Kearney, 2001). In addition, it refers to “students who have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day” (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998, p.162). More specifically, this study focused on the phenomenon of school refusal as it occurs within the middle and high school setting which serve as major school transitions (King, Ollendick, & Tonge, 1995) (Appendix A – Delineated Terms and Definitions Related to School Refusal).

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on school refusal from a public health perspective, explaining the rationale for why it should be considered a public
health issue. The significance of school refusal as a public health issue is addressed, and situated within the sub-field of public health; school health. A description of the role of school health in public health provides further justification for this approach to school refusal. A synopsis of the theoretical framework of social constructionism is presented, followed by a brief explanation of the study, the research questions addressed, and the limitations and delimitations that guided the study. Definitions of terminology used in the study are provided at the end of the chapter.

School Refusal

The literature on school refusal appears in various fields, including psychology, social work, nursing, education, and medicine (Berg, 1997; Berry, 1993; Freemont, 2003; Harris, 1980; Kearney, 2003; McAnanly, 1986). The field of school health, nested within public health, has been slow to acknowledge school refusal as a school health issue, with limited literature originating from this perspective (McAnanly, 1986; Torrens Salemi & McCormack Brown, 2003). School psychology as a field has dominated the research on school refusal, directing research attention to the individual student and their family. This has led to the construction of school refusal as a mental health issue.

School refusal is also discussed cross-culturally. Claims\(^1\) made related to the definition, cause, and prevalence of school refusal, as well as its appropriate treatment, appear in literature originating from the United States, Japan, England, Russia, and Australia (Elliott, 1999; Kearney, 2001; King et al., 1995; Shilov, 1998; Wataru, 1990; Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000). While the United States primarily addresses this problem on an individual, psycho-social level, other countries, such as Japan, claim that

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\(^1\) Claims refers to any verbal, visual, or behavioral statement that tries to convince people to take a condition seriously (Loseke, 2003).
the construction of school refusal arose from the social and cultural context, which led to the medicalization$^2$ and demedicalization$^3$ of school refusal (Yamazaki, 1994).

The Role of Public Health

The two goals of Healthy People 2010 are 1) improve quality of life and 2) eliminate health disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2000). One indicator of quality of life is sound physical and mental health (USDHHS, 2000). All aspects of health are affected by school refusal, including the physical, mental, social, and emotional. Ranging from the somatic affects of the refusal on the student to the stress experienced by all parties involved, school refusal can affect a child’s quality of life. Furthermore, if the situation is not resolved, the affects on long-term quality of life could prove devastating. The lack of education, or a poor experience within the student’s matriculation can reverberate throughout life. The second goal of Healthy People 2010 seeks to eliminate health disparities, which may be partially attributed to issues such as lack of education (USDHHS, 2000).

Education is cited as a factor in a longer, healthier life (USDHHS, 2000). This is attributed to many factors related to having an education, such as literacy and the ability to attain higher paid, more satisfying employment. Higher levels of education increase the possibility of obtaining and interpreting health-related information required to develop positive health behaviors (USDHHS, 2000). The underlying problems that could arise from an unresolved case of school refusal are discernible.

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$^2$ Medicalization describes a process of defining and treating non-medical problems as medical problems, usually illnesses or disorders (Conrad, 1992; Coreil, Bryant, & Henderson, 2001).

$^3$ Demedicalization refers to a problem that no longer retains its medical definition.
Koplan and Fleming (2000) asserted ten challenges for public health, two of which are pertinent to the issue of school refusal. The first is that the emotional and intellectual health of children is a need that must be addressed in public health (Koplan & Fleming, 2000). The ability to recognize and address the contributions of mental health to overall health and well-being is the second challenge facing public health (Koplan & Fleming, 2000). While mental health and public health function as separate entities in society, within the school setting, mental health is a key service within the school’s continuum of care. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sets forth in its research agenda that public health must acknowledge and investigate the multidimensional factors of health including the social ecological environment.

Public Health Significance of School Refusal

Prevalence rates of school refusal are difficult to ascertain due to the myriad of conceptualizations of student absenteeism. Rates are further confounded by inconsistent and unstandardized reporting systems. Accurate prevalence rates depend upon how absenteeism related to school refusal is defined, thus given the lack of consistency and consensus, the reported prevalence rates vary (King et al., 1995). General absenteeism rates range from 5.5 to 20% on an average school day (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004).

Kearney (2001) provides a best guess based on various absenteeism data that as many as 28% of school-aged children in American refuse school at some point during their education. Most studies on school refusal estimate the prevalence as 1-8% of the school age population in United States (Berry, 1993; Cerio, 1997; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996).
The issue of student absenteeism, a “symptom” of school refusal, did not become an issue in society until several key points in time. Industrialization led to different labor needs, and children were no longer in demand as members of the workforce (Best, 1994). Furthermore, the nostalgic sentiment attached to children did not emerge in culture until the late 17th and early 18th centuries (Best, 1994). Likewise, the mandate of compulsory education created social norms related to school attendance.

School absenteeism has been constructed as a syndrome within various contexts. School withdrawal refers to a parent encouraging nonattendance or deliberately keeping the child out of school (Kahn, Nursten, & Carroll, 1981). School dropout is the permanent withdrawal from school prior to completion (Kearney, 2001). School resistance, which refers to students reactions to perceived injustices or excessive demands, can also result in school absenteeism (Fine, 1991; Kearney, 2001). Truancy, also resulting in absenteeism, is often linked with delinquency and willful disobedience (Berg, 1997; Kearney, 2001).

The absenteeism associated with school refusal is a major issue given that if a student is not in school, they are not learning (Kearney, 2001). Schooling is a key element to modern society; therefore, when it is disrupted in any way, prompt attention is necessary (Garcia & Martinez-Urrutía, 1984). School refusal and the associated absenteeism can lead to severe short and long-term consequences for students, families, education, and society. Short-term consequences include distress, lowered self-esteem, problems with school work, decreased academic achievement, social alienation, family conflict, troubled peer relationships, and increased risk of legal trouble (Evans, 2000; Kearney, 2001; Last & Strauss, 1990; Want, 1983).
Follow-up studies of school refusal cases document the possible long-term consequences of school refusal. The findings of these studies must be considered in light of sample bias, small sample sizes, and the conceptual issues already mentioned. How schools’ perceive and identify such students has not been documented, making it difficult to conduct long-term follow-up with these students. Most schools lack a formal reporting system for school refusal, further complicating such follow-up (Evans, 2000). Truancy, school dropout, lack of higher education, employment troubles, and social problems represent long-term outcomes (Evans, 2000; Kearney, 2001; King & Bernstein, 2001).

One potential outcome of school refusal, school dropout, represents an occurrence that reverberates throughout an individual’s lifetime. Although school refusal is not definitive as a predictor of school dropout, it is a possibility if school refusal is not identified and resolved in a timely manner. The other factors that may influence school dropout include community, school, parent-family, social, personal, academic success, and various other factors (Kearney, 2001).

On average, dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn less money, and receive public assistance (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, & Wyche, 1997; Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). The effects of dropping out are multifactorial, impacting education, literacy, and the ability to attain employment. One of the Healthy People 2010 school health-related objectives includes increasing the high school graduation rate. Attainment of a high school education increases the possibility of obtaining and interpreting health-related information (Allensworth et al., 1997; USDHHS, 2000). The inability to access and understand health information has negative implications for health behaviors in general.
In terms of mental health outcomes, claims have shown that school refusal is associated with mental health disorders. Several follow-up studies have demonstrated, based on various factors, that school refusal may serve as a precursor to adult mental health disturbances (King et al., 1995). Berg, Butler, and Hall (1976) conducted a three-year follow-up with 100 adolescent students who received in-patient treatment for school refusal. Approximately one-third of the students continued to experience school attendance difficulties, social impairments, and emotional disturbance. Another third, while improved, experienced anxiety and depression. The remaining group resumed regular school attendance and social interactions (Berg et al., 1976).

Berg and Jackson (1985) conducted a ten-year follow-up with adolescent school refusers and found over half to be well-adjusted. However, about one-third had required some type of psychiatric follow-up during the ten-year period (Berg & Jackson, 1985). One follow-up study with adults who had school refusal as adolescents revealed increased psychiatric disorders with a significantly higher rate of outpatient psychiatric treatment than the control group (Flakierska-Praquin, Lindstrom, & Gillberg, 1997). They did not find differences between the two groups on factors such as school completion, marital status, or criminal offenses (Flakierska-Praquin et al., 1997).

One hypothesis that has been proposed is that there is a relationship between adult agoraphobia\(^4\) and school refusal in adolescence (King et al., 1995). This has been explored through retrospective studies focusing on adults with agoraphobia. Tyrer and Tyrer (1974) conducted interviews with 240 adult patients with agoraphobia, chronic anxiety, and depression as well as with a control group. Relatives, hospital records, and

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\(^4\) Agoraphobia is defined as a fear of open or public spaces.
physicians confirmed any reports of school refusal. The adult patients reported a greater incidence of school refusal than did the control, although there was no association with agoraphobia. The findings did support the notion of an increased likelihood of adult mental health issues among school refusers.

The long-term consequences associated with school refusal are related to the burden of mental illness on the health and productivity of the population (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2001). Over 15 percent of the burden of disease in market economies like the United States is due to mental illness, including suicide (NIMH, 2001). The prevalence rate of mental illness among children and adolescents is not well documented, but it is estimated that about 20 percent of children have mental disorders with at least mild functional impairment (USDHHS, 1999).

Evans (2000) pointed out that the societal costs of school refusal may include reduced productivity and increased educational costs. This is partially supported as some studies have shown that as students miss more days of school, educational institutions lose money and instructional time (Williams, 2002). Additionally, the long-term costs of mental illness are substantial (USDHHS, 1999).

The direct costs of mental health services in the United States in 1996 totaled $69.0 billion, which is 7.3 percent of total health expenditures (USDHHS, 1999). The indirect costs are defined in terms of lost productivity at work, school, and at home due to disability and death (USDHHS, 1999). Developing a stronger understanding of how school refusal is constructed in the school setting may provide better mechanisms for assurance of the physical, emotional, and intellectual health so that students may develop into healthy and productive adults.
Education has been associated with mental health status (World Health Organization, 2001). The risks to mental health from educational experience stem from dropout during secondary school (which includes grades beyond the elementary level), therefore the emphasis is to prevent attrition prior to entrance into secondary school (World Health Organization, 2001).

The World Health Organization (1948) defined health as, “a state of complete well-being, physical, social, and mental, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p.100). Similarly, school health as conceptualized by the Coordinated School Health program, addresses the physical, social, and mental well-being of students, through the assurance of a healthy school environment, health education, and services (Allensworth et al., 1997).

The Role of School Health

Historically, schools have played a strategic role in public health, providing a myriad of health and social services for the student population (Allensworth et al., 1997). In 2001, Turnock described public health as the “collective effort to identify and address the unacceptable realities that result in preventable and avoidable health outcomes and it is the composite of efforts and activities carried out by people committed to these ends” (p.19). He suggested the greatest gains in alleviating today’s major health problems will come from collective action, especially at the community level. Community is defined not in geographic terms, but as “aggregates of individuals who share common characteristics or other bonds” and who effectively use assets to achieve their health goals (Turnock, 2001, p.311).
The mission of school health parallels and relates to the mission of public health. Whereas public health’s mission is to “fulfill society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy,” school health seeks to assure conditions in which children can be healthy (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 1988, p.7). The IOM report (1988) included the need to focus on the main sectors of society that impact the health of the population. This includes the community, of which schools serve as a key component.

The concept of healthy people in healthy communities translated in the National Education Goals, which state that schools should have students with healthy minds and healthy bodies so that learning may take place (Allensworth et al., 1997). Schools are mini-communities, enmeshed within larger social contexts. Students comprise one component within this complex and dynamic system we refer to as school. Composed of multiple parts, schools create a community within existing communities, which mesh to create the individual school climate.

The school setting promotes accomplishment of the core public health functions, as well as achievement of the 10 essential public health functions (Noland, Troxler, & Torrens Salemi, 2004). McGinnis and DeGraw (1991) cited that one-third of the Healthy People 2010 objectives could be met or significantly achieved within the school setting. Serious health problems faced by children including chronic lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and the social and cultural conditions that breed depression, anxiety, and poor self esteem demand a change in service delivery approach (Peterson, Cooper, & Laird, 2001). School health and public health must focus on more than the physical aspects of student health, such as the emotional and social aspects.
Comprehensive school health consists of “an organized set of policies, procedures, and activities designed to protect and promote the health and well-being of students and staff which traditionally includes health services, a healthful school environment, and health education” (Joint Committee on Health Education Terminology, 1991) and provides an alternate mechanism for the assurance function of public health. School environment, education, and services are critical areas of school health, providing various avenues for addressing school refusal (Allensworth et al., 1997).

The concept of a healthy school environment refers to safe physical surroundings, supportive policy and administration, and a healthy psychosocial environment (Allensworth et al., 1997). Health education, within the area of education, is charged with addressing the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of health. Services within schools include the provision of counseling, psychological, and social services that promote academic success and address the emotional and mental needs of students.

Kolbe (2002) proposed that CSHP can assist schools in achieving their educational goals, while simultaneously addressing public health concerns. He discussed four types of goals in education. Type I includes health attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Type II involves health behaviors and outcomes. Type III represents the main goal of educational outcomes, while Type IV addresses broad social outcomes. This corresponds with the previous delineation of two perspectives on health education by Lohrman, Gold, and Jubb (1987). They declared that school health education could be viewed as technical, providing the means to increasing the likelihood of a student becoming a good, productive member of society or it can be idealistic, by adding to the holistic nature of learning, enabling them to learn better and become healthy.
These perspectives of school health recognize the potential and need to address such issues as school refusal, which is a threat to health that arises from the social environment and behavior, and could be considered a social morbidity (Simons-Morton, Greene, & Gottlieb, 1995). School health is concerned with, “the institutions and social conditions that impede or facilitate individuals toward achieving optimal health” (Griffiths, 1972). A widening range of behavioral issues in the school institution, including school refusal, place youth at an increased risk for dropout and, therefore, serve as obstacles to achieving optimal health. This risk status brings school refusal into the purview of school health.

Theoretical Perspective

It is evident that school refusal, despite its variations in conceptualizations, is an important school and public health issue. Traditionally, school refusal research focuses on the individual student from a traditional positivistic approach. The implicit assumption of existing research is that the researchers know and understand the social processes and construction of meaning surrounding school refusal within the school setting. This has led much of the research to search for a single truth or reality of school refusal; a truth that is context free (Slife & Williams, 1995). It focuses on the reality of school refusal as understood by the researchers, failing to take into account the subjective experiences of those who are working directly with this population of students - the school personnel.

The theoretical underpinnings of past school refusal research include psychodynamic theory and attachment theory. Psychodynamic theory’s assumption of the unconscious and conscious mind locate the issue of school refusal within the child and, while fruitful, has led to what might be considered victim blaming. Attachment theory
conceptualizes school refusal as the product of an overly dependent caregiver-child relationship, situating the issue within the family unit and the child (Last, 1988).

School personnel work with large numbers of students on a daily basis; therefore, research aimed at understanding their experiences with these students could lead to the development of far-reaching prevention and early intervention efforts as opposed to individualistic approaches to school refusal. The literature has posited that there is a tendency for school personnel to place all students exhibiting school refusal into one category (Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992). This is an important point, given the various conceptualizations of school refusal. Labeling a child as such can make intervention difficult (Phelps et al., 1992).

This research expands the literature by exploring how school personnel make sense of school refusal. This study uses a social constructionist framework, which proposes that reality and the social phenomena of life are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionism is an epistemological theory that suggests that people socially construct meaning through social processes and interactions (Burr, 1995; Loseke, 2003). Pilkington and Piersel (1991) cited the need for school refusal research to focus on the school. There has been a considerable lack of attention on the school setting, in particular on the school personnel in relation to school refusal (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). The use of this framework represents a shift from the typical approach to understanding school refusal within the context of the school setting.

Social constructionism acknowledges that people construct their reality, and that this reality is not concrete and absolute, but is itself a perception of reality. Loseke (2003) indicated that although these constructions are perceptions of reality, they still have real
life implications. Therefore, this theory guides the exploration of how school personnel construct their perceptions of school refusal. In addition, there is a need to understand how those perceptions affect interactions with students who portray the signs associated with school refusal.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigates how school personnel construct their perceptions of school refusal within the school setting and how their perceptions affect interactions and social processes with students who experience school refusal. School personnel are cited as being primarily responsible for identifying school refusal, therefore the focus is on this particular sphere (Bernstein, Svingen, & Garfinkel, 1990; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

The use of the sociological framework of social constructionism assists in increasing our understanding of how schools and school personnel construct the meaning of school refusal. Social constructionism asserts that knowledge is created and recreated through social interactions; therefore, school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal are likely shaped by their interactions with students, other personnel in the school, the district, and the larger culture in which they are located (Burr, 1995; Loseke, 2003). It is how we make sense of conditions, experiences, and people in commonsensical ways. This assumes that perceptions and interactions reciprocally determine one another through an iterative process. Findings from a preliminary study revealed that researchers in the field of school refusal and school personnel conceptualize the terminology and definitions of school refusal differently (Torrens Salemi, 2004).
This preliminary study conducted two separate Delphi panels; one consisted of national researchers on school refusal, and the second consisted of school personnel from the School District of Shermer County\(^5\), the same school district in which the current study was conducted. The panel of school personnel chose to use the term school phobia (focusing on the reason) viewing it as the more appropriate term, as opposed to researchers’ use of the term school refusal (focusing on the behavior). Therefore based on these findings, in the study described here, the researcher refrained from using pre-defined researcher descriptions. This allowed the participants to play a role in defining the behavior of school refusal in their own terms.

The findings from this study will help bridge the gap that exists in translating research into practice (Glanz, Lewis, & Rimer, 1997; Kearney, 2003). It also expands upon existing research by adding insight into the multiple perspectives of school refusal. Theoretically, this research represents a type of paradigm shift, possibly contributing to the conceptualization of school refusal, as it currently exists. Practical implications of this research include possible recommendations for prevention, early intervention, and staff training. Broader implications include development and implementation of school health and education policies related to school refusal. Additionally, research focusing on school staff may pinpoint potential bias within the identification process, and in turn, shed light on why low prevalence rates of school refusal exist. It could assist in the development of specific tools to use in assessing valid prevalence rates.

\(^5\) All proper nouns have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identity and anonymity of study participants and locations. Additionally, all references that might identify the location of this study have been removed. The assignment of pseudonyms prevents the reading of this text from becoming monotonous.
This study employs a contextual (or dualist) social constructionist perspective, acknowledging that the structure of the school and its organization are real in regards to the day-to-day lives of personnel and students. The framework of social constructionism also guides more than the focus of the research questions addressed in this study. Social constructionism proposes that there is no single truth or reality, but rather, multiple, constructed perceptions of reality. Multiple data points were employed to capture the multiple realities of the school personnel and the school district. Social constructionism also calls for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. The framework of social constructionism also guided the methods for this study.

Semi-structured interviews with school personnel at the middle school, high school, and district levels in the School District of Shermer County were conducted to gain an understanding of the social construction of school refusal. School personnel interviewed at the school level included the assistant principals, school psychologists, social workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, teachers, attendance office staff, and school resource officers. The district level interviews were conducted with personnel in departments related to guidance, psychology, school health services, and social work. Any school personnel in their first year of employment were excluded from the study, as the likelihood of cumulative interactions with students with school refusal was limited.

The interviews provided qualitative data with the guidance of a semi-structured interview guide. Prior to interviews with the district level personnel, a comprehensive review of state and local level statutes and policies related to school attendance was

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6 The School District of Shermer County will henceforth be referred to as “the district” as opposed to abbreviating to the SDSC, which is cumbersome for reading.
conducted. Observational data was collected within the schools selected to participate in interviews. This provided insight into the climate and culture of the individual school settings. Finally, a descriptive survey was conducted with all middle and high school principals in the district to gain a general understanding of how school refusal information is documented.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and entered into Ethnograph® for qualitative data analysis (Scolari Qualis Research Associates, 2001). Opening coding was used to create a codebook, which was then used to code the interview data.

Research Questions

The purpose was to: 1) describe school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal and 2) identify ways in which these perceptions influence the methods and strategies utilized by individual schools and their district to prevent, identify, and manage youth identified as experiencing school refusal.

1. How do school personnel construct their perceptions of school refusal?
   1a). How do school personnel think about school refusal?
   1b). What influences their understanding of school refusal?

2. What are school personnel’s reported perceptions, explanations, and beliefs related to school refusal?
   2a). How do school personnel describe school refusal?
   2b). What are the different forms of school refusal identified by school personnel?

3. How do school personnel perceive students they identify as experiencing school refusal?
3a). How do school personnel describe students identified as experiencing school refusal?

4. What are the consequences of their perceptions for the recognition of school refusal among students?

   4a). What is the process by which school personnel identify students refusing school?

   4b). How do school personnel evaluate their experiences with students with school refusal?

Delimitations

1. This study was delimited to the School District of Shermer County, located in the Southeastern United States.

2. This study was delimited to the district level departments, middle schools, and high schools located within the School District of Shermer County.

3. This study was delimited to school and district level personnel working, with at least a year of experience, in the School District of Shermer County.

4. School personnel, for the purpose of this study, included principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, guidance counselors, health services staff, social workers, resource officers, teachers, and attendance office staff.

5. The interviews conducted with school personnel were delimited to schools that are randomly selected.

6. District level personnel included personnel working within district level departments related to the job functions of the aforementioned school personnel, including student
support services (social work, school health, and psychological) and guidance
services.

7. Only participants’ who voluntarily agreed to participate were included.

8. The results of this study are on the participants’ perceptions, recall, and interpretation
of their experiences.

Limitations

1. The school district and the personnel interviewed in this study may not be
representative of all school districts in other areas of the county, state, country, or
world.

2. Results of the study may not be generalizable to other schools, school districts, or
their personnel.

3. The study was based on self-reported data from those included in the study.

4. Schools randomly selected to participate in interviews for this study may be different
from those that were not selected.

5. School personnel in the schools selected who agreed to participate in this study may
be different from those who did not agree to participate.

6. District level personnel who agreed to participate in this study may be different from
those that did not.

7. Principals who responded to the descriptive survey may be different from those that
did not.

8. The results of this study are based on the participants’ perceptions, recall, and
interpretation of their experiences.
9. As a qualitative exploratory study, conclusions regarding cause and effect or statistical associations can not be made.
Definitions of Relevant Terminology

1. School refusal – refers to student refusal to attend school for various unexplained reasons. Constructs related to school refusal include separation anxiety, specific phobia of school, and conduct disorder. It has also been defined as a child-motivated refusal to attend school, difficulties remaining in classes for an entire day, or both (Kearney, 2001). Specifically, Kearney (2001) describes school refusal as occurring in youth ages 5-17 who exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: completely absent from school, attend school but leave some time during the day, attend class following misbehaviors such as clinging, aggression, refusal to move, or running away, attends school under great duress that may lead to pleas for nonattendance in the future. This definition represented the consensus of the professional school psychology literature and reflects some of the insight developed through the Delphi panel with national researchers (Torrens Salemi, 2004).

2. Separation anxiety – “childhood anxiety disorder that is characterized by excessive anxiety (fear, worry) concerning separation from a major attachment figure and/or home” (Last, 1988). Separation anxiety is listed as a disorder in the DSM-IV with specific diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It is sometimes viewed as an explanation of school refusal.

3. School phobia – Although not formally accepted as a disorder, school phobia within the DSM-IV can be classified under specific or social phobia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Specific phobia involves a persistent fear and avoidance of an object or situation. Social phobia is characterized by the fear or avoidance of social situations. School phobia therefore, may be constructed as a reason for school refusal.
Many school personnel have continued to use this term, despite a movement in the professional literature to find more specific ways to address the various forms of school refusal, such as delineating non-problematic versus problematic absenteeism (Kahn et al., 1981; Kearney, 2001, 2003).

4. Compulsory education (compulsory school attendance) – State Statutes K-20

Education Code Title XLVIII, Chapter 1003 on Public K-12 Education, Section 21 on school attendance states that “all children who have attained the age of 6 years or who will have attained the age of 6 years by February 1 of any school year or who are older than 6 years of age but who have not attained the age of 16 years, except otherwise provided, are required to attend school regularly during the entire school term.

5. School absenteeism – refers to any absence from school for any legal or illegal reason (Kearney, 2001). The State Statutes mandates school attendance, and directs each school district to adopt an attendance policy in accordance with the State Education Code. The School District of Shermer County delineates excused from unexcused absences. Excused absences allow the student to complete make-up work, whereas this is not permitted for unexcused absences. Excused absences are limited to the following: 1) a doctor’s appointment with documentation; 2) accidental injury to the student; 3) death of an immediate family member; 4) observance of a religious holiday; 5) preplanned absence with three day approval of school official; 6) a legal subpoena; 7) emergencies related to weather, family crisis, accidents on the way to school, or bus breakdowns; 8) approved visits to colleges; 9) and with school board permission, during suspension. Unexcused refers to absences that are not accepted as
excused, or caused by truancy (see #9 for description of truancy). Middle schools are permitted to develop plans to award grades incentive points to encourage attendance, and high schools have exam exemption policies for the same purposes.

6. School withdrawal – when a parent actively encourages a child’s nonattendance or deliberately keeps the child home from school (Kahn et al., 1981).

7. School drop out – permanent withdrawal from school prior to high school graduation (Kearney, 2001). The State defines a dropout as a student who withdraws from school, without transferring to another school, home education program, or adult education program (Bureau of Education Information and Accountability Services, 2003). The State also acknowledges dropout as including students who leave school due to marriage, failure of state assessments required for graduation thereby not qualifying for certificate of completion, not meeting attendance requirements and student whereabouts are unknown, and withdrawal due to hardship.

8. School resistance – involves various student behaviors that occur in reaction to perceived injustices, inequities, or excessive demands at school. It is a conscious nonconformity to the institutional constraints of schooling (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999).

9. Truancy – Referred to in the State Statutes as a “habitual truant” in Section 1, Chapter 1003 of the K-20 Education Code Title XLVIII. It is defined as “a student who has 15 unexcused absences within 90 calendar days with or without knowledge or consent of the student’s parent, is subject to compulsory school attendance and is not exempt by meeting the criteria for any other exemption specified by law or rules of the State Board of Education.
10. Social constructionism – Gergen (1985) outlined four key assumptions of the social constructionist perspective. These included 1) a critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge; 2) historical and cultural specificity of how we understand the world; 3) knowledge is sustained through social processes between people and through their daily interactions which serve to construct shared ideas and knowledge; and 4) knowledge and action go hand in hand (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985).
CHAPTER II:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There intention of this literature review is two-fold. First, this chapter provides an overview of the published literature on school refusal. Second, this chapter builds the rationale for a social constructionist approach to understanding school refusal within the context of the school setting. This chapter provides an overview of the role of schooling in society, to demonstrate the important role it plays in the lives of young people. The rationale for addressing school refusal as a school health issue is reviewed, providing a general overview of school absenteeism, a discussion of the implications of school refusal and related absenteeism, an explanation of the role of the school and school personnel in school refusal, and a review of the difficulties schools face in addressing school refusal as indicated by the literature.

The public health implications of school refusal are addressed through a discussion of the identification of school refusal, a description of its occurrence and reported characteristics of students who experience it, a review of reported estimates, and a summary of related health and social consequences. In the tradition of the social constructionist framework, the historical construction of school refusal is outlined, ending with an examination of the theoretical implications of this approach to school refusal. A section providing an overview of the theory of social constructionism provides a review of the major works in social constructionism, an explanation of the underlying
assumptions and tenets of the perspective, and an identification of studies conducted from this perspective. A critique of the perspective is offered, reviewing the major strengths and weaknesses, followed by an application of social constructionism to school refusal as a cross-cultural phenomenon. The chapter also presents an overview of the setting for this study, the School District of Shermer County. The concluding section provides a summary of the literature reviewed within this chapter.

Introduction

The term “school refusal” is used in this literature review as it is the contemporary term used within the professional literature. However, the present study used the language of the participants, which included a range of terms and descriptions including but not limited to school phobia. This literature review draws on all literature related to school refusal and its various conceptualizations. Therefore, in some sections, in order to keep consistent with the referenced author’s original intent, some terms (such as school phobia) will be used interchangeably.

The outcome of school refusal appears simple, yet, is quite serious; the student refuses to attend school. Given that school is five days a week, school refusal becomes a daily issue. Problems associated with school refusal are considerable, leading to potentially adverse consequences (Hsia, 1984; Jenni, 1997; King & Bernstein, 2001; Want, 1983). It is important to recognize that legislative statutes mandate school attendance. School refusal is an issue that requires quick resolve to avoid dismal results. Schools represent the key element in school refusal; therefore, a brief overview of schooling in general is warranted.
Overview of Schooling

Schools are a unique social institution charged with the task of educating and socializing young people. The obvious point of school is to provide formal educational instruction to children (Best, 1994; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Schools represent one of many social spheres that have an influence over the lives of young people, providing peer interaction, socialization, and the development of normative behavior (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2000). The role of schooling has evolved over time.

Schools in the United States began primarily because of the demand by the educated elite to provide their children with the educational needs to maintain their social status (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). The push for compulsory education for all students, not just the wealthy, began as a form of social control (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Education was a means to ensure a productive and moral workforce. Compulsory attendance laws were enacted between 1880 and 1920 (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999).

Today, legal statutes mandate school attendance in the United States and in most Westernized countries. Students in schools are under the supervision of someone other than their family; school personnel. School personnel have some form of specialized training, and recognize themselves as experts in working with students (Best, 1994). They are therefore likely to define students and their problems differently from family members (Best, 1994). Given the amount of time students spend in school, schools and school personnel often act in loco parentis, assuming the obligations and responsibilities of preparing students to become productive members of society.
Approximately 48 million youth attend almost 110,000 elementary and secondary schools for six hours each day in the United States (USDHHS, 2000). Over 95 percent of all youth ages 5-17 are enrolled in school (USDHHS, 2000). Young people spend the majority of their waking hours in school, creating a setting in which there is the potential for harmful conditions (USDHHS, 2000).

School Refusal as a School Health Issue

Schools’ interest in addressing the health needs of children stem from the concept that healthier children learn better (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, & Wyche, 1997; USDHHS, 2000). The inclusion of health and social services dates back to the late 1800’s corresponding with the high influx of immigrants (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Part of the reason for the inclusion of these services was because the poor conditions among immigrant children impeded their learning process, also interrupting the “Americanization” process encouraged by policymakers (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). These health and social services have developed into considerable responsibilities for schools, remaining an important function of schools today. Although schools do not have the sole responsibility of addressing all of the health and social problems of young people, they do attempt to provide a healthy climate, educational curriculum, and appropriate services that can improve their health status (Allensworth et al., 1997; USDHHS, 2000).

The role of school health has evolved with public health, mimicking the epidemiological transition from infectious disease to chronic disease. For example,

5 Americanization refers to the process of socialization that policy makers felt was important for immigrants in order to maintain law and order (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). It represents another form of social control.
schools served a major role in ensuring immunizations, but have now transitioned into addressing social morbidities such as depression, violence, bullying, and suicide as major health priorities. School health, as an extension of public health, recognizes the important reciprocal relationship between health and education (Noland, Troxler, & Torrens Salemi, 2004). When students have trouble attending school, there is much cause for concern (Kearney, 2001; King & Bernstein, 2001; Torrens Salemi & McCormack Brown, 2003). It is necessary to explore briefly the various forms of school absenteeism, as this is the first outcome of school refusal that can negatively affect both the health and learning of students.

Various Forms of School Absenteeism

School absenteeism is referred to as any absence from school for any legal or illegal reason (Kearney, 2001). Approximately 13-14 percent of 8th- and 10th-graders were absent more than 5 days during a four-week period in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002a). Absence from school not only affects the student, but her or his classmates, teachers, and schools (NCES, 2002a). It leads to classroom distractions, repetition of school material, remedial work, and increased costs (NCES, 2002a).

School withdrawal refers to a parent who encourages nonattendance or deliberately keeps the child out of school (Kahn, Nursten, & Carroll, 1981). School resistance, which refers to students’ reactions to perceived inequalities in school, can also result in school absenteeism (Fine, 1991; Kearney, 2001). School dropout is the permanent withdrawal from school prior to completion (Kearney, 2001).
Truancy, also resulting in absenteeism, is often linked with delinquency and willful disobedience (Berg, 1997; Kearney, 2001). Truancy is said to occur when children are absent from school without the knowledge of their parents (Berg, 1997). This behavior is associated with antisocial characteristics, lying, stealing, and disruptiveness (Berg, 1997). It has been linked with conduct disorder\(^6\) and school dropout (Berg, 1997; Kearney, 2001).

*School Dropout*

Dropping out of school has been associated with multiple social and health problems, such as substance abuse, delinquency, intentional and unintentional injury, and unintended pregnancy. The status dropout rate\(^7\) was 10.7 percent of persons 16-24 years of age in 2001 (NCES, 2002b).

Students who exit school prior to graduation are more likely to experience poverty, underemployment, and social despair (Doll & Hess, 2001). Dropout carries societal burdens such as lost tax revenues and reduced economic productivity (Doll & Hess, 2001). Dropout prior to high school is non-existent, indicating the importance of addressing school difficulties earlier in the educational career of young people (USDHHS, 2000). School attachment and positive school experiences enhance the likelihood of school completion (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

*Dropout, school refusal, and labeling.* Much of the research on dropping out focuses on, as does the research on school refusal, the characteristics of students who drop out of school. This literature has led to common perceptions of students who drop

\(^{6}\) Conduct disorder – involves a pattern of repetitive and persistent behavior where the basic rights of others as well as age-appropriate social norms and rules are violated (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

\(^{7}\) Status dropout refers to all persons aged 16-24 who dropped out of school regardless of when it occurred.
out of school (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Various studies have concentrated on the school sphere to explore its contribution to the occurrence of dropping out (J. A. Baker et al., 2001; Doll & Hess, 2001; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Fine, 1991; Gallagher, 2002; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993).

These studies have focused on the lived experiences of students who dropout, and their perceptions of their experiences in schools. Similar to research in school refusal, there has been a lack of focus on the perceptions of school dropout held by school personnel, and their interactions with the students (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). There is some suggestion that the research bias of focusing on the characteristics of students can lead to labeling and stigmatization of students (Coreil, Bryant, & Henderson, 2001). This is due in part to the manner in which the students themselves have been constructed as “social problems.”

Approaches to helping children with school refusal are often different from those for students who are truant, therefore the ability to distinguish between the two is paramount (Elliott, 1999). Hsia (1984) regarded school refusal as a continuum progressing from “involuntary” symptoms to “willful” refusal (or truancy). Berry (1993) asserted that it is the responsibility of both school personnel and parents to identify, understand, and help students with school refusal, as these students are often overlooked, misdiagnosed due to similarities to truants, and other characteristics that are not consistent with the school setting. Furthermore, Berry (1993) hypothesized that many of the behavior problems of secondary students may be due to the inability of parents and school professionals to identify and treat the students with school refusal during the elementary years.
The tendency for school refusal research to focus on the individual and their family unit can lead to victim blaming and a de-emphasis on the role of the school (Terry, 1998). The impetus to focus on the family unit in school refusal research may be due in part to earlier conceptualizations that focused on the mother-child relationship developed out of psychodynamic theory. This is now frequently referred to as separation anxiety, although there is still some overlap in the use of the terms school refusal and separation anxiety. While some research has focused on the home environment, others have pinpointed the school environment, both of which complicate the role of school personnel (Brulle & McIntyre, 1985; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Santiago, 1992; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

The Role of the School

Traditionally, the role of the school in absenteeism is seen in terms of tracking truancy rather than school refusal (Elliott, 1999). According to the literature, school districts do not routinely report school refusal rates, although one study of North Dakota schools found that seventy-five percent (N=288) of schools responding to a survey had some system for identifying school refusal (Evans, 2000; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). The lack of tracking may be due in part to the continued focus on the individual and family in relation to school refusal, leading to a failure to recognize the role of schools in addressing school refusal (Elliott, 1999). The tendency to group all absentee students together fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the problem, thus excluding critical information that can inform the solution to the situation (Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992).
The literature emphasizes the role of school personnel in identifying school refusal (Cerio, 1997; King & Bernstein, 2001; Murray, 1997; Phelps et al., 1992; Want, 1983). Also noted is that schools are not always structured to deal with school refusal appropriately (Want, 1983). Many recommendations are available as to why and how the school should serve as the center for identifying, addressing, and resolving cases of school refusal, emphasizing the key roles for school personnel in ensuring a collaborative effort (Berry, 1993; Brand & O'Connor, 2004; Brulle & McIntyre, 1985; Cerio, 1997). The literature recognizes the importance of early identification by school personnel as being crucial to achieve a positive resolution (Brand & O'Connor, 2004; Cooper & Mellors, 1990; Phelps et al., 1992; Want, 1983). While much emphasis is placed on the role of the school, there is a lack of information regarding what exactly is happening in schools related to early identification and management (King & Bernstein, 2001; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

Stickney and Miltenberger (1998) cited that despite advances in the knowledge of school refusal, the degree to which school personnel are aware of and use such information is questionable due to the disparity between research and practice (Kearney, 2003; Kearney & Beasley, 1994). They conducted a survey to investigate how public schools responded to students exhibiting school refusal behavior in North Dakota. Two hundred and eighty-eight school principals responded. Seventy-five percent of schools reported having some form of a school refusal identification system, although most schools chose not to describe the nature of the system. Fifty-seven percent of schools reported having a school psychologist. Overall, principals were the most frequently reported person to identify school refusal, especially in elementary grades. They were
less likely to be the person identifying school refusal in schools with grades 9-12 and K-8. School counselors were responsible for identifying school refusal in only 2 percent of schools. Schools’ confrontation of students with school refusal occurred in ninety percent of cases, and notifying parents in eighty-nine percent. Schools reported scheduling conferences with the counselor and student in only sixty-four percent of cases and with the parent and a school member (either administration or teacher) in only fifty-eight percent. Schools made referrals in sixty percent of the cases, and most commonly to a social worker. This is similar to Bernstein, Svingen, and Garfinkel (1990), who indicated that 42 percent of their sample of 76 students were referred by their school for outpatient psychiatric treatment for school refusal. Schools appear to be a likely source for identification of school refusal.

Mental health professional referrals were made in 18 percent of cases and juvenile justice referrals in 19 percent. Students were referred less frequently to physicians (7%) and psychiatrists (4%). Despite limitations due to the use of a descriptive survey and self-reporting bias, this study represents the only identified effort in investigating how public schools identify and respond to school refusal.

The question arises whether the lack of inclusion of parents and students in all identified cases is indicative of a lack of awareness of the seriousness of school refusal, especially in regards to negative long-term consequences associated with unresolved cases. The authors’ hypothesized that a lack of resources may be an explanation for their findings related to low parent involvement and lack of referrals (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).
Kearney and Beasley (1994) conducted a study similar to Stickney and Miltenberger’s (1998) focusing on practicing psychologists specializing in youth and family practice, as opposed to schools. The primary goal was to generate information for school psychologists about clinical prevalence, presenting characteristics, and treatment practices regarding students with school refusal. The study was initiated because school psychologists were sometimes unclear in their identification and treatment of students with school refusal. The major reason cited was the information gap between practice and research.

The response rate was relatively low at twenty-one percent (N=63), yet they reported that out of the 3,240 youth referred that year, there was a total of 197 school refusal cases. The students described in the study were predominantly male (60.4 percent), over the age of twelve, and evaluated by both the parent and psychologist as having moderate to severe school refusal. Additionally, one of the main reasons cited for refusing school was aversive social situations at school. The findings suggested that school personnel, who are most likely to identify these students, should first consider the environmental causes of the school refusal. Overall, the study provided important information for school personnel, but it was not indicated how this information should be communicated to them.

*The Role of School Personnel*

The idea of resolving school refusal from within the school is a core theme in the literature on school refusal (Berry, 1993; King & Bernstein, 2001). School personnel such as teachers, nurses, principals, and guidance counselors are cited repeatedly as those professionals who first identify the existence of a school refusal problem (Berry, 1993;
King & Bernstein, 2001; Setzer & Salzhauer, 2001). According to the literature, the principal is often the first to become involved with a school refusal case, especially in the primary school (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998; Terry, 1998).

The importance of recognizing school refusal within the school is that it can be acted on quickly to restore a sense of normalcy in the student’s life. Skilled identification, assessment, and management of school refusal at an early stage could preclude the need for outside referrals, although it is equally important for schools to be prepared to provide a continuum of care if such is needed (Elliott, 1999). School refusal is considered more difficult to treat the longer it goes unrecognized (Kelly, 1973).

One of the major recommendations of all treatments requires the prompt return of the student to school, whether or not they are actually in a class (Berry, 1993; Jenni, 1997; Klein & Last, 1989; Want, 1983). Vigilance and sensitivity among teachers and support staff such as school nurses and social workers are considered crucial (Elliott, 1999; Terry, 1998). Even the most calm and organized approaches can be lost in the stress and confusion brought about by school refusal (Jenni, 1997).

_difficulties within schools._ Reportedly schools have categorized students who are absent from school due to school refusal in the same category as truant students, yet it is important to differentiate between the two. The signs of school refusal are not difficult to discern, yet, without knowing the profile of vulnerable students, school personnel can easily miss them (Kohn, 1999). Knowledgeable school personnel are key for early identification of youth with school refusal to enable prompt treatment. It cannot be assumed that school refusal will go away on its own or that a parent or pediatrician will identify it (Want, 1983).
Most studies focus on the most severe cases of students with school refusal; those who have been admitted for inpatient and outpatient psychiatric treatment (Bernstein, 2001; Kearney, 2001; King et al., 1998; Last & Strauss, 1990). Therefore, the research can be somewhat misleading about the actual knowledge regarding school refusal and absenteeism in general.

Want (1983) cites a key factor that traditionally has prevented the prompt action required to resolve school refusal. There are tendencies within public schools to ignore children and adolescents who appear to have school refusal, focusing more on students with socially disruptive behavior (Want, 1983). School personnel may sometimes view interventions for students with school refusal with pessimism (Hsia, 1984; Weinberger, Leventhal, & Beckman, 1973). Furthermore, problems occur when school personnel have trouble differentiating between school refusal and truancy (Harris, 1980; Kahn et al., 1981; Want, 1983). These problems are inherent given that categorization depends on assessing motives, which can be unknowable, complex, and situated.

Berry (1993) contrasts the difference between the two by suggesting that truant students often have severe anti-social problems. They willfully hide their absences and appear to have a conduct disorder. A child with school refusal does not have these problems, and in most cases wants nothing more than to be in school (Jenni, 1997). Heightened awareness of certain characteristics can possibly aid in the prevention of school refusal. From the literature, it becomes evident that school personnel could play a central role in resolving school refusal. Unfortunately, problems such as poor identification and lack of emphasis plague the response to school refusal.
Waldfogel, Coolidge, and Hahn (1957) discovered direct consultation with the school led to a ten-fold increase of recognized cases during three months. They hypothesized that school refusal may persist undetected by common modes of referral leading to unresolved cases (Waldfogel, Coolidge, & Hahn, 1957). Though relatively outdated, the lack of recognizing school refusal remains a serious issue. Findings from studies by Stickney and Miltenberger (1998) and Kearney and Beasley (1994) also demonstrated issues related to referrals. This sentiment was reflected rhetorically by Pilkington and Piersel (1991), who acknowledged that most of the cases represented in the literature are based on referrals, therefore there may be many more cases that exist but were never referred.

Public Health Implications of School Refusal

School refusal is a complex phenomenon that occurs throughout the world. Due to its varying conceptualizations, it is difficult to assess the accurate impact and outcomes related to school refusal, although the evidence that does exist indicates that if ignored or improperly handled, school refusal can affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of students as well as incur social and economic costs for society.

In reviewing the literature for this study, it is important to address the manner in which students with school refusal have been characterized for two reasons. To address the public health consequences, it is important to describe students most likely at risk for school refusal. The second is to document how these students are described in the literature as a point of reference for how they are actually perceived within the school setting. Despite the inherent limitations, an overview of the reported prevalence rates of school refusal is provided, along with a review of related outcomes.
Identification of School Refusal

While the research on school refusal has not focused on risk factors per se, it has focused on the characteristics of students who experience school refusal. While they are not referred to as risk factors, descriptions and characteristics of these students provide information to aid in the identification and early intervention, if not prevention, of this phenomenon. Most of the descriptive research has led to “diagnostic criteria,” although there is no official acceptance of such criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Kearney, 2001). The author cautions against strict adherence to the proceeding descriptions, as they are presented as an example of how school refusal has been conceptualized across diverse disciplines. The overview of these characteristics includes descriptions of the occurrence of school refusal and various reported characteristics of students who typically experience school refusal.

Occurrence of School Refusal

Researchers agree that the general times of onset occur at key transitions in a student’s life - at the beginning of formal education, at the transition to middle school, junior high, or high school, relocating to a new school altogether, or at the end of compulsory education (Bernstein, 2001; Berry, 1993; Kearney, 2001; Kearney & Albano, 2000; King, Ollendick, & Tonge, 1995). Referrals for school refusal cases are more likely in the fall semester (Kearney & Albano, 2000). The school grades identified as higher risk include 6th, 7th, 9th, or 10th grades, with the most problematic cases occurring in the middle-junior high school years (Kearney, 2001). Other characteristics include frequent changes in schools, emotional adjustment problems, school related fears, and a family history of school refusal (Berry, 1993; Kearney, 2001).
School refusal may begin with a stimulus, followed by a course of events, although each case is unique. Triggers may include a variety of stimuli, such as an embarrassing situation, confrontation with a bully, a disagreement with a teacher, or some other traumatic event (Kohn, 1996). After the stimulus event occurs, the primary caregiver may hear complaints of stomachaches. The child may have dizziness, nausea, or have a fever (Berry, 1993). The parent subsequently may permit him or her to stay home. It is believed that by allowing the child to stay home, the parent unknowingly enables the school refusal behavior (Kearney, 2001). As the starting hour of school passes, the child’s symptoms may begin to subside. The symptoms often intensify on Sunday evenings, Monday mornings, or following a vacation (Berry, 1993). This pattern may continue each day depending on the severity of the case.

Jenni (1997) carefully described the type of panic experienced by students with severe cases of school refusal:

There is a sense of the body being out of one’s control. Those afflicted may experience faintness, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, loss of control, the desperate need to escape, and a sense of impending doom that includes the belief that one is about to die or go insane (p.211).

The more severe cases generally seem to occur during adolescence and include the above-described panic attack (Jenni, 1997). One of the hallmark behaviors, according to Pilkington and Piersel (1991), is failure to remain in school despite pressure or threats of punishments from parents, teachers, and school administrators. Most professionals who have dealt with cases of school refusal agree that if untreated, it can have a permanent and adverse effect on the youth’s social and emotional development (Kearney, 2001;
King & Bernstein, 2001; Want, 1983). Likewise, untreated school refusal has the potential to affect school performance, academic achievement, and learning.

**Characteristics of Students with School Refusal**

Want (1983) described five common characteristics of students with school refusal: anxiety, willfulness, dependency, depression, and unrealistic self-image. Anxiety is the most distinguishing feature of a student with school refusal. Willfulness, the manipulation of authority figures, is not as common, while dependency, reliance on a parent for support and protection, is readily seen. Depression is viewed as both a cause and effect of school refusal (Bernstein, 2001; Paccione-Dyszlewski & Contessa-Kislus, 1987). An unrealistic self-image is common in adolescents with school refusal (Want, 1983). While these characteristics may be observed in truant students, they occur more frequently among students with school refusal.

There has been some indication that school refusal is indicative of an underlying anxiety or panic disorder, thus serving as a symptom. Three coexisting conditions suggested as central to the onset of panic disorders related to school refusal include: (a) a genetic predisposition to anxiety; (b) a threatening loss event; and, (c) an internal, physical experience that appears catastrophic to the individual (Jenni, 1997; King et al., 1995; Phelps et al., 1992; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991).

Another theory on the profile of students with school refusal hypothesizes that the student will have at least one parent who is highly anxious (Bernstein et al., 1990; Cerio, 1997). This proposition is consistent with Jenni’s theory of being predisposed genetically to anxiety (Jenni, 1997).
Lee and Miltenberger (1996) referred to the typical student with school refusal as being male, higher socio-economic background, and experiencing school refusal post-puberty (Lee & Miltenberger, 1996). This has been contested by some researchers who indicate that school refusal occurs evenly among males and females, although it may appear that more females experience fear or anxiety based school refusal, whereas males are categorized as oppositional school refusal (Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1986; Kearney, 2001; Kearney, Eisen, & Silverman, 1995; Kearney & Silverman, 1996; Last, Francis, Kazdin, & Strauss, 1987; Last & Strauss, 1990). Few studies have examined ethnic or racial characteristics of students with school refusal. Of studies conducted based on populations from clinical settings, students were primarily white (Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1986; Kearney, 2001; Last et al., 1987). This must be carefully considered, as minorities may be underrepresented in clinical settings (Kearney, 2001). It is generally agreed that students with school refusal excel academically prior to absenteeism, as they may be achievement-oriented students who set high standards for themselves, and may pressure themselves and fear imperfection (Kearney, 2001).

Reported Estimates of School Refusal

Several researchers cite that school refusal is on the rise, although there is a lack of supporting evidence to document this observation (Terry, 1998). The prevalence studies on school refusal are limited in various ways. Few prevalence studies have been conducted, and those that have contain inherent flaws due to conceptual and reporting issues. A large portion of the research conducted has been based on psychological case studies (Cretekos, 1977; Weinberger et al., 1973).
The early literature on school refusal made claims about school refusal’s seriousness and the severe, but nebulous consequences if not resolved. These claims were made without substantial evidence as to how conclusions were derived. The variability of definitions of school refusal does not allow for a definitive prevalence (Brand & O'Connor, 2004; Kearney, 2001; King et al., 1995). Most studies on school refusal estimate the proportion of students with school refusal in the United States to be 1-8% of the school age population (Berry, 1993; Cerio, 1997; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996).

Kearney cited that approximately 28% of American students will refuse school at some point in their educational career (Kearney, 2001). Last and Strauss (1990) referred to school refusal as a “relatively widespread disturbance,” with a prevalence rate among the general population of school age children at 1% and among clinically referred children between 3 to 8% (Last & Strauss, 1990). Jenni (1997) put the prevalence rate into perspective by estimating that, if a person were to walk into a middle school, she or he would find between one and five individuals with the problem (Jenni, 1997).

Conversely, King, Ollendick, and Tonge (1995) described the prevalence rate as relatively low among school-age children. Using a strict definition of school refusal and requiring all informants (parents, teachers, and child) to agree that the child missed school due to extreme fear resulted in 0.4 percent of the sample being classified as school refusers (King et al., 1995). When they loosened this definition’s criteria and included in the sample students with high absenteeism that were judged fearful by any of the informants, the prevalence jumped to 5.4 percent. This provides further evidence that the operationalization of the definition influences the prevalence rates (King et al., 1995).
Comparatively, Jenni (1997) pointed out that school refusal is more prevalent in highly competitive societies such as Japan, where it is estimated to occur in 31% to 52% of middle school students (Jenni, 1997). While in the United States, the numbers are not as high as Japan’s, even an estimate of 1% is sufficient to demand more attention. From the literature, one can conclude that the prevalence of school refusal may be a reflection of what the larger populations of students are experiencing within their school environment (Tice, 1999).

**Consequences of School Refusal**

Most of the literature on school refusal has concentrated on describing its occurrence, discussing case studies of students who experience it, and examining its empirical distinctions. Studies that document the effects of school refusal on long-term outcomes are limited, and those documenting long-term health outcomes are even more limited. Most of these studies are based on small sample sizes of limited generalizability, as they mostly report the outcomes for severe cases that required in-patient treatment. The literature is replete with references to general short and long-term outcomes, despite limited longitudinal follow-up studies. This section provides an overview of the short and long-term outcomes of school refusal as indicated by the literature, as well as a review of the potential social and economic costs.

**Short-Term Outcomes**

The short-term outcome of school refusal is primarily the interference or loss of education (Berg, 1997). Emotional distress, somatic illness, family disruption, inadequate peer relationships, and poor academic performance with the possibility of failure
characterize some of the immediate outcomes associated with school refusal (Berg, Nichols, & Pritchard, 1969; Last & Strauss, 1990; Rettig & Crawford, 2000).

Decreased student academic achievement resulting from chronic absenteeism is a primary concern (Evans, 2000; Williams, 2003). Lower achievement creates a ripple effect of other issues, such as increased risk of retention, lower self-esteem, lower grades, or decreased future opportunities (D. Baker & Jansen, 2000; Evans, 2000).

**Long-Term Outcomes**

Longer-term outcomes associated with school refusal may include problems of anxiety, depression, and reluctance of students to leave home to set up their own families (Berg, 1997). Increased risk for later psychiatric illness, employment difficulties, and social impairment are also associated with school refusal (Berg et al., 1969; Last & Strauss, 1990; Rettig & Crawford, 2000).

Early research on outcomes of in-patient treatment for school phobia revealed that 50 percent of adolescents continued to have serious difficulties with school attendance and 70 percent had continuing evidence of mental disorder (Berg, Butler, & Hall, 1976). Positive outcomes for treatment of school refusal seems to be related to how quickly the student returns to school at least part-time, participation by both parents in resolution, agreement among all involved parties (including school personnel, other professionals, and parents), decrease in family stress, and contingency plans (Evans, 2000; Paige, 1993).

**Social and Economic Costs**

There are significant costs to the individual, family, and society relating to school refusal. The stress of dealing with school refusal can strain family relationships and
functioning, as parents may have to miss work to go to the school (Evans, 2000). Societal costs are associated with increased educational costs, higher probability of high school dropout, the loss of productivity, and increased social support (Evans, 2000). Schools also incur various costs related to increased absenteeism.

Teachers must provide remediation for absentee students, increasing their workload, which interrupts the learning of others (Williams, 2002). The additional time and attention to intervene in cases of school refusal and related problems of absenteeism increases the workload for school personnel (Williams, 2002). Higher rates of absenteeism can affect school funding which is partially based on Full Time Equivalence (FTE) (Williams, 2002). In the Oakland, California Unified School District, they lost nearly four million dollars per year due to an absenteeism rate of about six percent (Williams, 2002). Also in California, the Los Angeles School District reported a loss of $200,000 due to absenteeism in one year from a single high school.

While school refusal is reportedly believed to constitute only a small percentage of absenteeism rates, the reality is complicated by the ambiguities that continue to plague the published literature on school refusal. Arguments could be made that while school refusal is not the only reason for high absenteeism, it may account for a portion of students with problems of absenteeism and truancy (Williams, 2003).

Historical Construction of School Refusal

Bolman (1967) cited school refusal as an example of how knowledge about an emotional disorder develops. Due to its short history in the professional literature, and its rapid scientific development, there is a unique opportunity to trace its development (Bolman, 1967). Bolman distinguished five steps in the historical construction of school
refusal in the United States: 1) labeling it as a problem; 2) differentiation from truancy; 3) development of clinical knowledge; 4) expansion to the school environment; and 5) recognition of school refusal as a complex syndrome (see Appendix A for a description of terms and definitions related to school refusal). Reviewing the historical shaping of the body of knowledge provides the backdrop necessary to understand the research challenges of today.

Defining School Refusal and Absenteeism as a Problem

The first step was the labeling of the condition of absenteeism as a disorder. This coincided with the introduction of compulsory education laws (Bolman, 1967; Kearney, 2001, 2003). Mandatory school attendance was introduced in the late 1800’s, adopted by most states by 1900, and in the southern states by 1918 (Kotin & Aikman, 1980). The initial conceptualization of absenteeism was truancy. Truancy was and continues to be referred to as the unlawful and willful absence from school without knowledge or consent of the parents (Broadwin, 1932; Kahn et al., 1981; Kearney, 2003).

Delineation of School Refusal from Other Forms of Absenteeism

The differentiation of school absenteeism represents the second phase in the construction of school refusal. Broadwin (1932) began this differentiation when he stated, “I wish to describe a form of truancy which may have received little attention. It occurs in a child who is suffering from a deep seated neurosis of the obsessional type of display; a neurotic characteristic of the obsessional type” (p.254). Kearney (2003) indicated that this differentiation created two schools of thought regarding school refusal. The first, the traditionalists, regarded the problem as an illegal and delinquent behavior, and the
second, the contemporaries, viewed the problem from a medical framework seeing it as a complex neurotic condition.

Johnson, Falstein, Szurek, and Svendsen (1941) later coined this neurotic truancy as “school phobia.” They described school phobia in terms of three main components, including acute child anxiety, occurring with increased anxiety in the child’s mother, and a history of an over dependent mother-child relationship (Johnson et al., 1941). Later Johnson (1957) clarified that separation anxiety was a more accurate term for what had been earlier defined as school phobia, declaring that adequate scientific evidence existed to demonstrate the cause of this behavior (Johnson, 1957). Despite the clarification by Johnson, the term school phobia remains popular even today (Kearney, 2003).

School phobia has been re-conceptualized throughout the history of its study, from separation anxiety to a more general dread of attending school (Johnson, 1957; Waldfogel et al., 1957). Over time, school phobia evolved into an umbrella term that covered virtually everything dealing with school absenteeism. School phobia, school refusal, school avoidance, separation anxiety, and truancy are terms used interchangeably to report on this phenomenon. Yet, the literature suggests that each separate term possesses inherent characteristics that demand differentiation.

The construction of school refusal subtypes have focused on various aspects including dysfunctional characteristics of the child or family (Bernstein et al., 1990; Last & Strauss, 1990; Marine, 1968), reason for refusal (Kearney, 2001), and severity (Paccione-Dyszlewski & Contessa-Kislus, 1987). Coolidge, Hahn, and Peck (1957) described two types of school phobia. The first was the neurotic type, similar to the
original concept of school phobia, while the second, the characterological, more closely resembled truancy.

Kennedy (1971) approached this same conceptualization but operationalized variations of it. Type 1 school phobia was defined as neurotic crisis, which included acute onset, low grades, concerns about death, and good parental relations and adjustment. Type 2 school phobia was characterized by onset after multiple episodes of absenteeism, good grades, no concerns about death, and poor parental relations and adjustment. Various researchers expanded upon this dichotomy of school refusal, including Marine (1968) who proposed four categories of school refusal; simple separation anxiety (young children leaving parents for the first time), mild acute school refusal (like Kennedy’s Type 1), severe chronic school refusal (like Kennedy’s Type 2), and childhood psychosis with school refusal symptoms (fear, depression, social withdrawal, somatic complaints, regressive behaviors).

There appears to be a general consensus among researchers that constructs school refusal and truancy as distinct (Berg, 1997; Kearney, 2001; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991). Truant students typically spend their time out of school away from home, attempting to conceal their absence from their parents. They are described as lacking somatic illness, exhibiting poor academic progress, and anti-social behavior (Berg, 1997; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991). The concept of truancy constructs “bad kids” who should be controlled. Conversely, school refusal constructs “good kids” with problems that should be helped. Students with school refusal are described as exhibiting somatic illness and their parents are aware of their non-attendance. Reportedly, they are also described as having higher
academic achievement, although there are conflicting views within the literature (Kearney, 2001; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991).

Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard (1969) postulated criteria for distinguishing school phobia from truancy that have been widely accepted within the professional literature included the following (Brand & O'Connor, 2004; Brulle & McIntyre, 1985; Elliott, 1999; Kearney, 2001):

1. severe difficulty in attending school, often resulting in prolonged absence;
2. severe emotional upset, including excessive fearfulness, temper outbursts, or complaints of feeling ill when faced with the prospect of going to school;
3. staying home from school with their parent’s knowledge;
4. absence of antisocial characteristics, such as stealing, lying, and destructiveness; and,
5. a self-report of heightened level of negative affect and emotional distress.

Berg et al. (1969) also distinguished between acute and chronic school phobia, with acute referring to students who prior to the occurrence, had no attendance problems, while all other cases were considered chronic. Kearney and Silverman (1996) proposed a differentiation of school refusal based on duration. Self-corrective school refusal refers to students whose initial absenteeism ends within a two-week period. Acute school refusal refers to chronic absenteeism lasting from two weeks to a calendar year. Chronic school refusal refers to students whose absenteeism lasts longer than one calendar year.

The most recent research focuses on subtypes of refusal as they relate to maintaining variables or motivating conditions of the problem (Kearney, 2001; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). This includes focusing on what
reinforcements or rewards the student receives from refusing school. Kearney (2001) has urged movement away from the symptoms of school refusal to focus on function(s) of school refusal, which he has outlined into four categories. Function refers to what maintains or motivates a child’s refusal of school (Kearney, 2001). The functions, grouped by negative and positive reinforcements, include: 1) avoidance of specific fearfulness or general over-anxiousness related to the school; 2) escape from aversive social situations; 3) attention-getting or separation anxious behavior; and 4) rewarding experiences provided out of school (the function usually associated with truants) (Kearney, 2001). The first two represent the negative reinforcement, in which aversive conditions lead to school refusal, whereas the latter two represent the positive reinforcement domain, where the student refuses school for rewarding conditions (Kearney, 2001).

Development of Clinical Knowledge

The development of clinical knowledge, despite Johnson’s (1957) declaration that it was not necessary, followed as the next stage in the construction of school refusal. Most of the research focused on the clarification of intrapersonal characteristics of students refusing school, their family dynamics, and the development of empirical distinctions.

The psychodynamic approach, similar to the psychoanalytic, focuses on the child and the realization of her or his own limitations (Berry, 1993). It again traces back to the parents, whose relationship with the child allowed the child to think of herself as invincible, only to find out otherwise in school. The school threatens the child’s perception of invincibility and the child reacts by refusing school (Berry, 1993).
In some cases, school refusal has been described as co-occurring with various psychiatric disorders, including separation anxiety, anxiety, depression, social phobia, specific phobia, and agoraphobia (Berg, 1997). Most of the recent research claims school refusal is a manifestation of an emotional disorder. Recent clinical psychology research on school refusal delineated three types of anxious school refusal (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001); separation anxiety school refusal (Kearney & Silverman, 1996; Last & Strauss, 1990), simple or social phobia (Last et al., 1987), or anxious and/or depressed school refusers (Bernstein et al., 1990).

Egger, Costello, and Angold (2003) examined the association between anxious school refusal, truancy, and psychiatric disorders in a community sample of children and adolescents using descriptive definitions of school refusal. A secondary objective for the study was to determine if school refusal and truancy were mutually exclusive. This study, with a sample of 1,422 non-clinically referred students, found that school refusal was strongly associated with, but not the same as a psychiatric disorder. Anxious school refusal was associated with depression and separation anxiety disorder. Truancy was associated with oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and depression. Among mixed school refusers (anxious school refusal with truancy), 88.2% had a psychiatric disorder.

Bernstein, Svingen, and Garfinkel (1990) evaluated seventy-six families of children with school refusal who were outpatients at a school refusal clinic (Bernstein et al., 1990). The purpose was to investigate family functioning among children with school refusal. Their study separated students with school refusal and anxiety from those with school refusal combined with depression and anxiety, and school refusal and depression...
only. Family dysfunction was higher among families with students who had school refusal, anxiety, and depression than those with school refusal and anxiety only.

Attempts to develop empirical definitions of the various constructs of problematic absenteeism have been based on the differentiated sub-types of school refusal. One study employing factor analysis based on parent ratings identified a truancy component of problematic absenteeism that accounted for 20 percent of the variance, and a school refusal component accounting for 15 percent (Berg & Jackson, 1985). The truancy component relied mainly on lack of parental knowledge, and school refusal on behaviors such as staying home and resisting efforts to resume school attendance (Berg & Jackson, 1985).

Another attempt to develop empirical definitions of school refusal used cluster analysis and discerned three groups among seventy-two percent of a sample of youth with attendance problems (L Atkinson, Quarrington, Cyr, & Atkinson, 1989; Kearney, 2003). These groups included separation anxiety and overprotective mothers, perfectionism or fear of failure, and school refusal and psychopathic deviancy (L Atkinson et al., 1989). Another study, also using cluster analysis, focused on youth with severe nonattendance (Bools, Foster, Brown, & Berg, 1990). Sixty-eight percent were assigned to a non-clinical group, while the rest were identified with refusal (21%) or truancy (11%) (Bools et al., 1990).

Ecological Expansion of School Refusal

The fourth stage in the development of knowledge about school refusal focuses on the expansion to the school and other social environments and influences (Bolman, 1967; Kearney, 2001). The concept of school phobia was expanded by Waldfogel, Coolidge,
and Hahn (1957) who defined school phobia as “a reluctance to go to school as a result of a morbid dread of some aspect of the school situation” (p.754). This is significant as it moved school refusal from the student, initiating an alternative construction of school refusal as school centered, and not maternal or home centered (Bolman, 1967; Kearney, 2001). Bolman (1967) pointed out that the recognition of the school environment was characterized by public health and prevention oriented approaches, although documentation of such approaches is not evident within the literature.

School Refusal as a Complex Issue

The last stage in the construction of school refusal recognizes it as a complex issue, involving factors ranging from the intrapersonal to the community. Bolman (1967) appeared ahead of his time by citing the need for public health prevention oriented approaches for addressing school refusal. He discussed the need for attention to the school environment and other social influences, and that school represents a microcosm of the larger community.

King and Bernstein (2001) recommended an examination of efforts occurring within schools to identify and manage school refusal. Such research would examine what processes schools engage in when identifying school refusal. This could provide insight into development of successful interventions and possibly determine the potential for students to fall through the cracks. The acknowledgement of school refusal as a complex issue is evidenced through the lack of agreement that continues to pervade the professional literature.
Barriers to Future Advancement in Research and Practice

Cited as a byproduct of poor interdisciplinary communication regarding school refusal, disparities over the conceptualization, assessment, and treatment reveal ongoing difficulties (Kearney, 2003). Often, practitioners, researchers, and others are not in-sync with addressing students who experience school refusal, conducting research, or classifying absenteeism (Kearney, 2003; Torrens Salemi, 2004).

Kearney (2003) cited the need for a “communal definitional system” due to such a lack of consensus. He indicated that research is conducted across disciplines with psychologists studying anxiety-based school refusal, and educators, social workers, and others studying delinquency based refusal, yet definition remains an issue. Although the research is characterized by a lack of agreement, children continue to be “diagnosed” and subjected to varying types of assessment or treatment.

Within the published literature, researchers rarely mention other forms of problematic absenteeism and there is likewise an inconsistent use of existing terminology. One example is an article that discusses what the authors refer to as “FVSN” or frequent visitors to the school nurse (Sweeney & Sweeney, 2000). They describe a phenomenon similar to school refusal, yet never make any connection that may be related.

Such inconsistencies create problems for readers, who may be uncertain of how to consider the terms, definitions, and research findings. There is also a lack of consensus concerning terminology, definitions, identification, assessment, and treatment (Kearney, 2003). The inconclusiveness regarding school refusal impedes the progress needed to
better understand school refusal identification, assessment, and treatment (Kearney, 2003).

For the advancement of research on school refusal, it has been suggested that the field must make efforts to move towards consensus on these issues (Kearney, 2003). Such consensus is significant to the field of both school and public health as it is essential information for assuring early intervention of school refusal to provide positive health and educational outcomes.

The challenge of coming to an agreement regarding school refusal remains in the varying manners in which school districts conceptualize this phenomenon. The recognition of school refusal as a socially constructed problem provides an understanding of why the issue has developed with such complexity.

*Theoretical Implications*

School refusal as evidenced is an issue of social and public health importance. School refusal and absenteeism have been the focus of attention for researchers from various theoretical orientations including psychologists, educators, social workers, nurses, physicians, and others. The increasing study of absenteeism in general has led to a “fractured state of terminology” (Kearney, 2003, p. 9). Historically, school refusal has been constructed in divergent ways. Multiple theoretical approaches have been proposed, mostly originating from the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Such theory has been used primarily to inform research on the causes and treatment of school refusal.

Berry (1993) outlined the three predominant theoretical approaches to school refusal as psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, and behavioral and learning theories. These theories all present the intra-psychic perspective on school refusal, yet the movement in
the literature has suggested this does not provide an adequate explanation for all of school refusal (Kearney, 2001; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Terry, 1998; Wataru, 1990; Yoneyama, 2000). The positivist paradigm underlies the majority of the research in this field. Positivism makes the assumption that research can access models that describe reality (Slife & Williams, 1995). The theories that frame school refusal research, and their ontological and epistemological orientations, have hidden assumptions, which can lead to unknown implications for students, their families, and their futures.

Most of the research has focused on findings of experts who attempt to define and explain school refusal in its entirety. This research has been fruitful, but the results are limited in their utility, as the focus is typically on clinically referred students, which represent the extreme. These students may be easier to identify, whereas the majority of students may not be as extreme and therefore more difficult to discern. Due to a lack of discriminant validity and poor construct validity in school refusal assessment instruments’ ability to distinguish school refusal, there can be negative implications for large populations of students (Kearney, 2001).

Kahn, Nursten and Carroll (1981) discussed the effects of school refusal validity issues in relation to the danger of labeling. Concepts such as stigma\(^8\), labeling, and medicalization are all manners in which deviance is controlled by socially created constructions or categorizations (Coreil et al., 2001). In regards to school refusal, this becomes an issue in relation to distinguishing between school refusal and other

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\(^8\) Stigma refers to the negative perceptions attached to a particular condition or categorization (Link & Phelan, 2002). Assigning labels can lead to stigma. With children, the issue of labeling has implications for the issue of “becoming the label,” in which the child’s social identity becomes tied to the label. This can be both positive or negative labels, such as a “gifted” student, a “truant”, or a “delinquent.”
absenteeism problems as well as in how school refusal is perceived by those in power to
assign labels.

Little information is available on school personnel’s perceptions of students with
school refusal. Despite inferences for the need of such research, this area remains
untouched. This limits future research on the construction of school refusal in relation to
its health and social consequences for students. There is limited information regarding
students who are just beginning to experience problems with school refusal and what
occurs within the school setting. The issue of what occurs before school refusal
progresses to the extent that the student requires a mental health referral remains
unknown as well. The continued research from one perspective further reinforces the
conceptualization and discourse of school refusal as a mental health issue.

School refusal is a complex issue, as demonstrated within the literature, which
would benefit from an alternate conceptualization. Social constructionism is a theory that
can provide a better understanding of how school refusal is conceived of within the
school setting by school personnel. The theory has been used to understand school refusal
within Japanese culture, while its use in understanding school refusal has been sporadic
in the United States (Santiago, 1992; Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000). The study
presented here is the first to approach school refusal from a social constructionist
perspective to understand how schools and school personnel perceive students who refuse
school.

Theoretical Perspective

This section provides an overview of the theory of social constructionism, reviews
major works in social constructionism, explains the major underlying assumptions and
tenets, and identifies related studies that use the theory. A critique of social
constructionism provides the major strengths and weaknesses of this perspective. The
application of social constructionism to school refusal is outlined, drawing on the
construction of school refusal as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

History of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism cannot be traced back to one single source, but to various
combined influences resulting in a theoretical movement that emerged approximately
decades ago (Burr, 1995). The roots of social constructionism date back to symbolic
interactionism, which arose from George Herbert Mead’s work *Mind, Self, and Society*
(Mead, 1934). This perspective viewed people as constructing their own and each other’s
identities through everyday encounters with each other in social interaction⁹ (Burr, 1995;
LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Social constructionism emerged as a rejection to the
objectivist stance (Best, 1995).

The paradigmatic milieu for the development of social constructionism was the
phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology’s foundational questions focus on
“understanding meaning, structure, and the essence of lived experience of a phenomenon
for a person or a group of people” (Patton, 2002, p.104). The main focus of this tradition
is to explore how people make sense of experience and in turn translate that experience
into individual and shared consciousness and meaning (Patton, 2002). Phenomenology
emerged first as a philosophical tradition through the work of Husserl (1967). It was the

⁹ Social constructionism is conceptually different from “constructivism.” While social constructionism
focuses on meaning as arising from social construction and interaction and being social sustained,
constructivism refers to a more internal, meaning making that occurs within the individual’s unique
experience (Burr, 1995).
work of Alfred Schutz who established phenomenology as a social science perspective (Schutz, 1977).

Constructionism is consistent with the postmodernist tradition. Postmodernism was a reaction to positivism, which advocated the search for truth or reality through scientific method (Burr, 1995; Slife & Williams, 1995). Postmodernism rejected this idea, instead assuming that people are not determined by instincts, laws, needs, or other systems, but are actively involved in creating their own lives and meanings (Slife & Williams, 1995). It also suggested that knowledge is created among groups of people who share language and perspective, of which there can be multiple perspectives, which are constantly open to revision as boundaries expand (Burr, 1995; Slife & Williams, 1995).

A major contribution to social constructionist analysis in the United States is considered Berger and Luckmann’s text (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. They argued that humans create and sustain social phenomena through social practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995). Since the introduction of this initial groundwork on social constructionism in sociology, it has been used in various research disciplines to study a myriad of topics including: public health (Bartley, Smith, & Blane, 1991; Brown, 1995; Lloyd, 2000); Human Immuno-deficiency Virus (Herek, Capitanio, & Widaman, 2003); teen pregnancy (Phoenix, 1993); domestic violence (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Stark, Flitcraft, & Frazier, 1979); health communication (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003); sexual health (Harden & Willig, 1998); health education (Shevalier, 2000); education (Kenneth Gergen, 1995; Tuffin, Tuffin, & Watson, 2001); psychology (KJ Gergen, 1985), women’s emotions (Cosgrove, 2000; Danforth & Navarro, 2001); eating disorders
Tenets of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), ascertains that reality is socially constructed, thus the sociology of knowledge must focus on social processes by which reality is constructed. The main social practices described by Berger and Luckmann included externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995). Externalizing refers to when a person acts on the world, creating some “artifact or practice” such as Burr’s example of putting an idea into writing (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995, p.10). An example of externalization might be the creation of social practices or institutions, such as the concept of schooling. The concept developed from social processes and interactions that led to schooling becoming an “objective reality” institutionalized in society. Externalizing thus puts the ideas or constructions into the social realm, where people can re-tell the idea, develop it, and it becomes an objective feature of the life, thus objectivation occurs. Thus, people regard the objective feature as an external reality that has a factual existence. Future generations are thus born into a world where something that was socially constructed exists as a part of the world, and thus they internalize it. Therefore, the world can simultaneously be socially constructed by people, and experienced by them as if it were fixed and stable (Burr, 1995).

Gergen (1985) described social constructionist inquiry as being concerned with “explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise
account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (p.266). Although there is no one feature that identifies social constructionism, there are key assumptions that guide the theory (Burr, 1995).

Gergen (1985) provided several main assumptions that guide the social constructionist orientation. The first is that what we take to be the experience of the world does not impose the terms by which the world is understood (KJ Gergen, 1985). This refers to taking a critical stance of the “taken-for-granted” ways of understanding the world (Burr, 1995). Secondly, social constructionism assumes the terms in which we understand the world are social artifacts, and that the process of understanding is the result of an active and cooperative endeavor of persons’ interactions. This means that knowledge and meaning is both historically and culturally specific and relative. Included in this is that due to the historical and cultural relativity, we cannot assume that one way is better or any more near the truth than another (Burr, 1995).

The third point made by Gergen was that the degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not dependent on the validity of that perspective but instead on the social processes that maintain that perspective (Burr, 1995; KJ Gergen, 1985). Burr (1995) explained that social constructionism views our shared versions of knowledge as being constructed through the social interactions that occur in our day-to-day lives.

Burr (1995) further delineated these assumptions of social constructionism. She described the theory as anti-essentialist, as it assumes people are not pre-determined by some inherent content within the person, such as personality. Instead, people are themselves a product of social processes. Additionally the theory denies that our
knowledge is a direct perception of reality, therefore it is anti-realist. Social constructionism draws on the idea of language as a pre-requisite for thought. Language itself is both a product of social processes and a form of social action.

Social constructionism focuses on social interactions, practices, and processes (Burr, 1995). Thus social constructionist research focuses on questions about how certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are achieved by people through interaction. Knowledge is viewed as something that people do together through their interactions and not something that they have or do not have (Burr, 1995).

Within sociology, the application of social constructionism to social problems was initiated by the work of Kituse and Spector (1973) (Best, 1993). Their work focused on the construction and maintenance of social problems through social processes such as claims-making (Best, 1993; Kituse & Spector, 1973). Kituse and Spector (1973) stated, “the existence of social problems depends on the continued existence of groups or agencies that define some condition as a problem and attempt to do something about it (p.415). They focused more on how a problem became known as such, as opposed to the actual problem.

According to Loseke (2003), a social problem is defined by four criteria. These include that the issue is widely evaluated by social actors as one that: 1) is wrong; 2) widespread; 3) is something that can be fixed or changed; and 4) people believe it should be changed. This approach to social problems uses social constructionism to focus on social problems, how they come to be considered as such, and how the subjective definitions of social problems change objective characteristics of the world.
The assumptions of social constructionism necessitate the question of whether constructionism “should ignore the world outside of the constructions of it” (Loseke, 2003, p. 206). This has been addressed through the creation of strict (or monist) versus contextual (or dualist) constructionism (Loseke, 2003; Patton, 2002). Strict constructionism avoids assumptions about objective reality, whereas contextual constructionism references the world as if it exists separately from the constructions of it (Best, 1993; Loseke, 2003). It is evident from the delineation that contextual constructionism is more likely to be of interest in the field of public health and school health, as it represents the more practical approach for understanding the constructions of issues of importance. Loseke (2003) pointed out that social constructions of perceptions of reality can in fact have real implications for people.

In summary, social constructionism is based on the assumption that there are multiple realities that are socially and historically contextual (Burr, 1995; Loseke, 2003). Social constructionism attempts to access the constructions of knowledge about perceived reality that arise from social interactions and processes that are rooted in language which is itself socially constructed (Burr, 1995; Loseke, 2003; Slife & Williams, 1995). It is an epistemological theory in that it makes assumptions about the nature, origins, and limits of knowledge (Slife & Williams, 1995).

This study adhered to the premise that school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal are created through their daily interactions with students, other school personnel, and the district in which they work. Recognizing the social constructionist assumption that multiple realities construct the perceptions of school refusal, a contextual constructionist approach acknowledges the school district’s perceptions and constructions
of school refusal as a separate “constructed reality” from the subjective experiences of the school personnel.

**Critique of Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism has been described not so much as a theory, but as “a stance, an orientation, a perspective we apply to better understand the world around us” (Best, 1995, p. 349). There are several critiques of this theory, most of which center around relativism and truth (Burr, 1995). One of the main critiques of social constructionism is its relativism (Slife & Williams, 1995).

Social constructionism is ontologically relative (Burr, 1995; Patton, 2002). Meaning is constructed within culture, history, and time. There is no standard against which to validate the claims of social constructionism, except to continue using the perspective in the analysis of different issues (Burr, 1995). The issue of relativism calls into question the theory itself, as it too can be considered a social construction (Burr, 1995; Slife & Williams, 1995).

Due to the relativity of social constructionism, any understandings of social processes generated through this approach are limited in generalizability. This is inherently a function of the assumptions of social constructionism, as they assert that knowledge is culturally and historically specific and relevant. In addition, the social constructionist approach generally calls for qualitative inquiry, which in itself is limited in the quantitative sense of generalizability. Instead, the concept of transferability takes precedence, which indicates that the consumer of the research findings is left to judge whether the findings are transferable to a similar setting.
Furthermore, the question of whether social constructionism offers any unique way of understanding the world as it exists naturally must be addressed (Slife & Williams, 1995). This theory does not attempt to provide insight into cause and effect or hypotheses such as these, but instead how people understand cause and effect. It moves out of the realm of positivism by focusing on social interchanges and their implications for people, as opposed to seeking the truth or some representation of the truth.

Social constructionism offers much insight into phenomenon as it draws on the lived experiences of the participants, instead of imposing the rhetoric of the expert. In fact it minimizes the expertise of the researcher, who assumes a “not knowing” stance in describing the narrative and interpretations of those under study as opposed to making judgments about the issue under study (Jankowski, Clark, & Ivey, 2000). Social constructionism thus captures and honors the multiple perspectives of participants (Patton, 2002). Likewise, it emphasizes reflexivity on the researcher’s part, so that they must be critically aware of their presence as a researcher and the implications of that presence (Burr, 1995; Patton, 2002; Sarbin & Kituse, 1994).

**Applicability to Public Health**

The use of social constructionism to examine public health issues is valuable considering health and social issues are situated within social and cultural contexts. Social constructionism has been used to study diagnosis and illness, in order to examine how social forces influence our understanding and knowledge of and actions toward health, illness, and healing (Brown, 1995). That knowledge in turn produces our assumptions about prevalence, treatment, and meaning of illness and disease (Brown, 1995; Herek et al., 2003). In the various sub-fields of public health, such as health
education and promotion, school health, or child health, understanding various issues in relation to knowledge, perceptions, and processes is an increasingly important aspect.

Shevalier (2000) used a social constructionist approach to examine tobacco education literature used in an alternative high school setting for at-risk youth. She found that the construction of smoking from the literature did not match the youth’s cultural contexts. Recommendations included ways to eliminate the dissonance in order to increase receptivity to the information. In relation to the school setting, researchers have focused on how school personnel and other professionals who work with youth construct their understanding of youth and various issues among youth (Danforth & Navarro, 2001; Davison & Ford, 2001; Ehrensal, 2003; Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1989; Erchul, Raven, & Ray, 2001; Smith, 1997).

One study interviewed health teachers to understand how they understand their role as a mental health professional in the school setting and in addressing students with possible mental health problems (Tuffin et al., 2001). Data analysis demonstrated that school health teachers moved from positioning themselves as mental health professionals to health educators with basic knowledge of mental health, challenging the idea that people have stable attitudes and knowledge bases (Tuffin et al., 2001). Teachers were also nervous about being in a role to refer students to mental health services (Tuffin et al., 2001). The authors’ recommended sensitive professional development to prepare teachers for identification and referral to make their experiences less stressful (Tuffin et al., 2001).

In a similar study, Danforth and Navarro (2001) studied the meanings of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as they are socially constructed through everyday language use by lay persons. Their conclusions indicated the need to be
careful in adhering to strict terminology for specific situations, such as in ADHD, and instead focus on the moral implications of the way people as users of language construct problems, solutions, and social identities.

Applicability to School Refusal

Social constructionism asserts that while there are multiple constructed realities, and that there is no single reality, social constructions can in fact have real implications for people (Loseke, 2003). Social constructionism focuses on social interactions, practices, and processes (Burr, 1995). Thus social constructionist research focuses on questions about how certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are achieved by people through interaction. Knowledge is viewed as something that people do together through their interactions and not something that they have or do not have (Burr, 1995).

This study used social constructionism as a framework to access school personnel’s constructions and perceptions of school refusal to understand how it is constructed within the school setting. This is important given the strong assertion within the literature that due to confusion and disarray within the field of research regarding school refusal, there is a lack of understanding, translation, and dissemination of findings between researchers and practitioners (Kearney, 2003).

School refusal has been constructed within various cultures, adding support for the appropriateness of a social constructionist approach to this study. The following review summarizes the cross-cultural construction of school refusal, explores existing discourses, and describes the role of the cultural context. Though limited, studies of school refusal in the social constructionist tradition are included within this review.
School Refusal as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon

While school refusal has been studied in various forms for the last century, in countries such as Japan, it is a more recent phenomenon. Commonly referred to as “tōkōkyoki,” the nation saw a dramatic increase in the 1980’s. In Japan, it has risen to the forefront of the nation’s attention at a rapid pace (Wataru, 1990; Yamazaki, 1994). School refusal has become such an issue that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child stated in its concluding observations, Article 43, that the State of Japan should “take further steps to combat excessive stress and school phobia” (United Nations, 1999). Japan had more than 127,000 reported cases in 1998, although this number was based on statistics reflecting the perception of school officials, of which the authors’ questioned the accuracy (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001).

Social Construction of School Refusal

Within most of the literature originating in the United States, the language used when describing school refusal appears to be influenced by the fields of psychology and medicine. School refusal is often described as a syndrome, symptom, disturbance, or an emotional disorder (Leslie Atkinson, Quarrington, Cyr, & Atkinson, 1987). It is identified as a problem, a behavior, or an issue to be addressed clinically. Interestingly, within the literature originating from Japan, school refusal is often referred to as a “phenomenon” or a “social problem” (Wataru, 1990; Yoneyama, 2000).

Best (1994) stated that the social problems of children are constructed within four categories of children. These include the rebellious child, the deprived child, the sick child, and the child-victim. School refusal has been constructed as a social problem by various fields who point out its potentially troublesome outcomes (Best, 1994). The
various conceptualizations of school refusal can fit into any one of these categories, depending upon the manner in which the child is perceived.

The construction of school refusal as a social problem originated in Japan (Wataru, 1990; Yamazaki, 1994). The development of family psychology and therapy in Japan is thought to have initiated with the social problem of school refusal in the 1980’s (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001). Although it has been predominantly discussed as a social problem in Japan, there has been a struggle over whether it is a social problem or a mental health issue (Wataru, 1990; Yamazaki, 1994). This struggle with competing constructions of school refusal, both within the literature in Japan and the United States might be referred to as “claims competition” (Loseke, 2003, p. 41). Claims competition can occur between social problems, such as terrorism or obesity. Claims makers\textsuperscript{10} compete to get audiences to believe that a particular issue is a social problem and that it is more important than other social problems.

In both Japan and the United States, there are claims that school refusal is a mental illness (Wataru, 1990). This situates school refusal as a problem of children who are weak, overly dependent, and have specific personality attributes (Kearney, 2003; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Wataru, 1990). Other claims construct school refusal as a product of the school system, constructing the students as victims\textsuperscript{11} of an oppressive atmosphere, with unsympathetic school personnel in an unnatural social setting (Terry, 1998; Wataru, 1990). Wataru (1990) echoed others’ caution of assigning labels to

\textsuperscript{10} Claims makers are people who say or do things (make claims) to convince audiences that there is a social problem (Loseke, 2003).

\textsuperscript{11} Loseke states that constructing victims is a prerequisite for convincing an audience that a condition is a problem. In this case, the victim, which refers to who and what is harmed by the social problem, is the student with school refusal.
students, especially in light of school refusal as a construction of mental illness (Kahn et al., 1981).

The theory of social constructionism locates the concept of identity formation within the social realm, thereby our identities as persons arise not from inside of us, but from the interactions and discourses that we encounter on a daily basis (Burr, 1995). This perspective adds further insight to the importance of using caution in assigning labels to people.

**Discourses on School Refusal**

Yoneyama (2000) examined school refusal by focusing on the various existing discourses\(^{12}\) that surround it. There are two overarching school refusal discourses identified by Yoneyama; the adult discourse and the student discourse. The adult discourse is composed of the psychiatric, behavioral, citizens’, and socio-medical discourses (Yoneyama, 2000). The following review of these discourses integrates research from the United States that demonstrates how these discourses have been constructed across cultures.

**The Adult Discourses**

The adult discourses on school refusal grew from the diverse views of adults in various fields, including doctors, psychiatrists, counselors, psychologists, teachers, administrators, government officials, educational critics, journalists, and parents (Yoneyama, 2000). Yoneyama asserted that the views created by these discourses directly effect students, as they influence how students are perceived and treated by

\(^{12}\) Discourse refers to “a system of statements which constructs an object” (Parker, 1992, p.5). Burr (1995) describes discourse as a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, and statement that in some way together produce a particular version of events. She asserts that numerous discourses “surround any object” and contribute to constructing it a different way (Burr, 1995, p. 49).
people who are in positions of power and authority. This discourse is categorized into four types, including the psychiatric, behavioral, citizens’, and the socio-medical.

*Psychiatric discourse.* The psychiatric discourse is similar to the discourse in the United States in that psychiatrists and physicians support it and view it as a mental health issue. The resolution for school refusal includes medical treatment and in-patient treatment (Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000). This was one of the first conceptualizations of school refusal in Japan, influenced by American and British studies (Yamazaki, 1994). Interestingly, although it serves as the predominant discourse in American and British cultures, it has yet to be adopted as the sole conceptualization in either.

This is evidenced by examining the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fourth edition, text revision (DSM-IV-TR). It does not contain a formal definition for school refusal or school phobia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Brand & O'Connor, 2004). The DSM-IV-TR does make reference to school refusal within diagnostic categories for separation anxiety, social phobia, specific phobia, and conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). This may indicate incomplete medicalization of school refusal.

In this case, school refusal has been constructed as a symptom of various psychiatric disorders, thus claims-makers advocating for a psychiatric conceptualization have not convinced the American Psychiatric Association audience of its status as a social problem (Loseke, 2003). Competing views of school refusal and related

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13 Incomplete medicalization occurs when “competing definitions of a phenomenon vie for legitimation” (Coreil et al., 2001, p.156)
problematic absenteeism are rooted in legal issues as well as the development of a sentimental attachment to children (Best, 1994).

**Behavioral discourse.** Teachers and other school personnel in Japan support the behavioral discourse, constructing school refusal as laziness, and focusing on discipline and punishment (Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000). This discourse is not as apparent among school personnel in the United States, as little research has focused on their perceptions of school refusal (Cooper & Mellors, 1990; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). The only study identified that examined school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal was conducted in the Great Britain (Cooper & Mellors, 1990).

The study focused on teachers’ perceptions of and differentiation between school refusers and truants. The authors’ discussed the importance of correct initial identification, as this often leads to the intervention plan. Once a child is labeled with one of these classifications, it is difficult for her or him to lose that label. The role of teachers’ perceptions served as a key element in determining the levels of description and explanations of absenteeism caused by school refusal and truancy (Cooper & Mellors, 1990).

In this particular study, perceptions among teachers within “special teaching units” were examined, as they are heavily involved in the management of school refusal and truancy. Thus, their attitudes and actions, determined by their perceptions, have an impact on how management of school refusal and truancy occurs.

This study also triangulated previous findings from self-reports of school refusers and truants. The findings indicated that teachers perceived school refusal and truancy differently. Students with school refusal were perceived as more emotionally disturbed
and with lower self-esteem than truants. In contrast, students with school refusal saw themselves as having higher self-esteem. Both teachers’ and school refusers’ indicated that they were more self-conscious. Truants, in both the teachers’ and the truants’ views, were considered less truthful than the school refusers were. There was some disparity between teachers’ perceptions and beliefs of school refusers and truants. School refusers perceived themselves as well behaved and hard working, while teachers did not. They also viewed school refusers as having poorer peer relationships. The main concern is that the discrepancies between teachers and students’ perceptions will make successful outcomes more difficult.

Citizen’s discourse. The citizens’ discourse on school refusal includes some parents and psychiatrists who claim school refusal is a normal reaction to schooling and that the problem is with the schools and the educational environment (Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000). Although there are allusions to this within the U.S. literature, little research has focused on this aspect in relation to school refusal (Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Terry, 1998). There is a growing consensus suggesting that greater attention should be given to the school environment and personnel in relation to school refusal (Bolman, 1967; Elliott, 1999; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

The school as the contributing factor in school refusal has been mentioned repeatedly, although not the center of one single study. Pilkington and Piersel (1991) suggested a shift in research to focus attention on the school environment and personnel, in an effort to determine if they are potential contributors to the etiology and maintenance of school refusal (Pilkington & Piersel, 1991). This recommendation was based partially
on the notion that the refusal may result from something unpleasant occurring within the school.

    School settings are often the source of bullying, adverse teacher-student relationships, hostile environments, and boredom (Elliott, 1999). The label of school refusal can prompt a defensive reaction from school personnel (McAnanly, 1986). McAnanly (1986) cited a defensive response because school refusal infers “that a person or situation at the school” is the stimulus for the fear (McAnanly, 1986).

    Long (1971) cited the issue of counter-transference as a potential problem within the school. The manner in which school refusal disrupts the child’s school routine becomes a threat to school personnel, which in turn is directed back against the child (Long, 1971; McAnanly, 1986). Unfortunately, it is stated that in order to reduce the threat felt by school personnel, they should be “informed that the conditions for school phobia existed within the family unit before the child ever entered school; the school is not to blame” (Long, 1971, p.292). This reveals the propensity to blame the family unit for the problem, and protect the school.

    *Socio-medical discourse.* A small number of Japanese physicians support the socio-medical discourse, which constructs school refusal as resulting from chronic fatigue syndrome, suggesting rest as a solution (Yoneyama, 2000). This discourse agrees with the citizens’ discourse in the cause of school refusal stemming from social structure of schools, and not the attributes of the student (Yoneyama, 2000). Miike and Tomoda’s research (as cited in Yoneyama, 2000) argued that school refusal is similar to burnout, resulting from the repeated exposure to the anxiety inducing environment of school. The
absence of this discourse may be due to cultural specificity and variations in the
collection of school refusal across cultures.

**Student Discourse**

In contrast to the adult discourse on school refusal, the Japanese student discourse
is described in various stages, which include the following:

1. “I just cannot go” – student is bewildered and troubled; goes to school clinic
2. “I want to go but cannot” – student experiences somatic illness
3. The shift from “I cannot go to school” to “I do not go to school” – student feels
   self-doubt then accepts school refusal as a choice
4. Discovery of self-hood and critical reappraisal of school – critical voice emerges
   on school and self-identity

These discourses, based on autobiographical reports from students, reflect
influences from the adult discourses (Yoneyama, 2000). It represents a process that
students report experiencing because of physical complaints, perceptions of themselves,
and of school. This research, although limited in transferability due to the cultural
context, represents one of the only studies to date that includes the voice of the student,
who is most important and least empowered in relation to school refusal.

Virtually no studies from the U.S. examine the perspectives of the student;
therefore, it is impossible to compare the student discourse and construction of school
refusal. Best (1994) cited the tendencies of researchers to focus largely on adult members
of the institutions of importance in preadolescents lives, rather than focus on the children.
The consequences of this neglect of school-age youth is that they are left to be studied by
psychologists, who focus on their individual psychologies, ignoring their role as social beings (Best, 1994).

The Cultural Context of School Refusal

What is similar between the constructions of school refusal across countries is the acknowledgement that the controversies over definition, conceptualizations, interpretation, and solutions have not been resolved (Kearney, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001; Yoneyama, 2000). It is pointed out that although school refusal appears to exist in multiple societies, the sociological cause is not constructed as the same, nor is its significance in the culture (Chiland & Young, 1990; Yamazaki, 1994; Yoneyama, 2000).

Yamazaki (1994) examined how the historical construction of school refusal in Japan demonstrates that the nation’s social structure and culture provide the context for viewing school refusal as a social problem. His examination of the competing discourses of the medicalization and demedicalization of school refusal reveals the claims-making and claims competitions that have taken place in Japan (Yamazaki, 1994).

Chiland and Young (1990) suggested that students reject or refuse school “within the context of the meaning of education for them within their own society” (p.4). How a society or culture regards and responds to school refusal is a critical element in understanding the social construction of school refusal. Furthermore, to understand how this meaning develops at the school level provides invaluable insight into future research, potential problems, and further understanding. Only one U.S. study was located that approached the study of school refusal from an ecological perspective using qualitative methodology (Santiago, 1992). The data analysis revealed perceptions at the various
ecological levels (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem levels), leading the author to describe school refusal as a socially constructed phenomenon (Santiago, 1992).

This research shed light on the importance of considering school refusal within the ecological context of the school and the interactions that occur within the school setting. The research also revealed there were negotiations regarding assignment of diagnostic labels between parents, school officials, and special education committees, and classifications of school refusal had racial and class implications (Santiago, 1992). This particular aspect of the research revealed that educational experiences and outcomes for students classified as school refusers were similar to students classified as at risk for dropping out. This provides support for future research to consider the implications of school refusal as a classificatory label.

*Popular Media and School Refusal*

The topic of school refusal has become a focus of the popular media, which serves as a reflection and perpetuation of the cultural context. Interestingly, school refusal has been cited as the result of bullying in several cases reported by the BBC News (BBC News, 2002, 2003; CBBC Newsround, 2003). The cases have caught public attention as they all resulted in legal charges being filed against parents for not forcing the student to attend school. In more than one case, the students reported being bullied to the extent that they developed “school phobia” at the thought of attending school (BBC News, 2003; CBBC Newsround, 2003). One case cited a student who was bullied about her weight, in turn leading to school refusal (CBBC Newsround, 2003). Informational websites post information and tips for parents on dealing with the school refusing student and popular magazines feature stories on the issue (CDADC's Project Integrity, 2004; Kohn, 1996).
Such popular media provides insight into the development of school refusal as a social problem of growing concern.

Overview of the School District of Shermer County

The School District of Shermer County (SDSC), located geographically in the Southeastern United States, served as the setting for this study. Shermer County has a large population estimated to be over 1,000,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). According the Census 2000, approximately 27% of this population is enrolled in school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). The conscientious decision to provide minimal descriptive information regarding the district was made in order to protect the anonymity and identities of participants and locations in this study. Estimates are provided based on actual numbers; however, all official references have been removed due to identifying information contained within these references.

The district is one of the largest school districts in the United States. Secondary education in the district is composed of separate middle and high schools. There are forty middle schools in the district, which include schools with grades 6 through 8, and twenty-three high schools, inclusive of grades 9 through 12. The student population is ethnically diverse study population, with a large representation of White, Hispanic, and African American students, and minimal representation of multicultural, Asian, and Native American students.

School refusal data in Shermer County is not readily available through public information channels. There is information that may include cases of school refusal, although they are not delineated. This includes dropout rates and rates of serious emotional disturbance. In 2001-2002, Shermer County had approximately 1,500 students
drop out of school, and an estimated 800 students met the criteria for seriously emotionally disturbed.

The school system personnel is relatively large with approximately 13,000 personnel. There are approximately 2,000 middle school teachers and 2,500 high school teachers. Support personnel total 1,300. There are an estimated 740 district and school level administrators. Various divisions composed of multiple departments provide the organization at the district level. The departments that this study focused on included those under student support services, which include guidance, social work, psychology, and school health.

The district level employs practitioners with special expertise in providing guidance, social work, psychological and diagnostic services, and school health services. Guidance services aim to provide developmental and comprehensive programs that support the school district’s goals. Social work services work to connect students and families with appropriate community resources, address problems that interfere with student success, and assist in attendance issues. The psychological and diagnostic services provide educational, emotional, and social support to all students, families, school personnel, and the educational community. School health services act to assure public health mandates concerning health requirements and screenings for education, as well as providing day-to-day monitoring of health procedures, and assessment of health problems. Each of these departments represents, to an extent, the personnel at the school level whose subjective experiences serve as the primary focus of this study. This includes the following personnel: principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, social
workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, teachers, attendance office staff, and school resource officers.

Summary of Literature Review

School refusal has had various conceptualizations within the professional literature, developed by a myriad of disciplines. School refusal involves the institution of schools, thus the role of schooling is important to consider. Schools play a major role in the lives of youth, providing essential skills that will be used throughout their lives. Legal statutes mandate schooling, hence, when students are absent there are many issues at stake. Schools historically have had a vested interest in the health of students, as health and education have complimentary goals. Additionally, school health has been established as an extension of public health.

School refusal’s association with absenteeism has implications for health and social outcomes. This is especially the case when the cause of absenteeism is associated with negative schools experiences, school refusal, truancy, or dropout. Due to the conceptual issues related to school refusal, differentiation of school refusal from other forms of absenteeism can be problematic. The role of the school is important, as schools serve as the central feature of school refusal. School personnel are identified as playing a key role in the identification of students with school refusal. Key personnel are in positions to identify students with school refusal, although little is known about how this occurs within the school setting. Difficulties arise due to tendencies to ignore students with problematic behaviors, trouble differentiating between various forms of absenteeism, and low referrals for services.
School refusal is described as occurring among adolescents during key transitional periods in the school career, such as moving from elementary to middle school. The public health implications involve short and long-term outcomes associated with loss of education and mental health, although extrapolation of these must be cautious as the research has issues of internal and external validity.

The construction of school refusal began with the recognition of school absenteeism as a problem. This developed into the delineation of school refusal (referred to at this point as neurotic truancy or school phobia) from truancy. Further research added the dimension of the mother child relationship, referring to the issue as separation anxiety. A focus on the development of clinical knowledge developed limited information regarding causes and symptoms for school phobia, also being termed school refusal. These two terms were separated, with school phobia being subsumed as a type of school refusal. The focus moved from the individual to school setting, although this area of research remains unexplored.

Much of the research on school refusal follows a traditional positivist paradigm. School refusal has been studied as a problem of the student, focusing on the dynamics of the individual students and their families, as opposed to studying the social or cultural context of the issue. Little research has explored the role of schools in school refusal.

Social constructionism offers an alternative to understanding school refusal, and the multiple perspectives that shape its understanding. It provides a framework for exploring how school personnel perceive school refusal and its construction within the school setting that lead to those perceptions. The review of literature suggests that cross-culturally school refusal has been socially constructed according to the discourses that
surround it. The social constructionist approach to understanding school refusal can help bridge the gap in research and expand the existing boundaries. This study was designed to understand the social interactions, processes, and perceptions that construct the understanding of school refusal within a school setting.
CHAPTER III:

METHODS

Introduction

This study, guided by a social constructionist framework and employing qualitative methods, sought to understand the perceptions of school refusal among school personnel in the School District of Shermer County (SDSC). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school personnel at the middle school, high school, and district levels. School personnel are cited as those persons most likely to refer students with school refusal for treatment outside of the school setting. Specific personnel who were more likely to have experience with students with school refusal were included. The use of a descriptive survey conducted with middle and high school principals provided detailed insight as to how school refusal information is documented at the school level within the district. This study represents a new endeavor in research on school refusal. One element is that unlike previous studies, this research focused on the school personnel’s personal experience and subjective definitions of school refusal in the school setting. The research was grounded in the language of the participants to reflect their voice and not that of the “researcher.”

This chapter describes the methods used in this study. Included is an overview of the rationale for a qualitative study design, with a description of the study population, the setting, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria that was employed. Sampling strategies
are provided for each method that was used for data collection. The rationale for various
data collection tools is outlined, followed by an explanation of the details for the specific
procedures. The data analysis is then described. The chapter ends with a review of the
criteria for judging qualitative research, including a synopsis of the strengths and
weaknesses of the study.

Research Questions

The purpose was to: 1) describe school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal
and 2) identify ways in which these perceptions influence the methods and strategies
utilized by individual schools and their district to prevent, identify, and manage youth
identified as experiencing school refusal.

1. How have school personnel constructed their perceptions of school refusal?
   1a). How do school personnel think about school refusal?
   1b). What influences their understanding of school refusal?

2. What are school personnel’s reported perceptions, explanations, and beliefs related to
   school refusal?
   2a). How do school personnel describe school refusal?
   2b). What are the different forms of school refusal identified by school personnel?

3. How do school personnel perceive students they identify as experiencing school refusal?
   3a). How do school personnel describe students identified as experiencing school refusal?

4. What are the consequences of their perceptions for the recognition of school refusal
   among students?
4a). What is the process by which school personnel identify students refusing school?

4b). How do school personnel evaluate their experiences with students with school refusal?

Study Design

Several factors led to the decision to use a qualitative design, incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews, observations, and a descriptive survey. The theoretical perspective of social constructionism provides the framework for the development of the study, which lends itself to qualitative methodology (Burr, 1995; Patton, 2002). Qualitative methodology is concerned with exploring how meaning is constructed. Qualitative methods, often used to describe, explain, explore, interpret, and build theory, have been defined as:

Procedures for investigating human action that… allow subjects to describe their own behavior and experience in the language native to their experience, and investigators to undertake the analysis of human phenomenon in conversational language rather than numbers (Slife & Williams, 1995, p.234).

A qualitative design allowed for the exploration of school personnel’s construction of school refusal, providing insight that is relevant for both the school setting and future public health research. Conducted within the social settings of schools within a district, a qualitative design provides a “real-world” perspective, which is lacking in the research on school refusal. Gergen (1985) refers to “negotiated intelligibility,” or, what makes sense within a culture is what is intelligible and agreed upon by people within that culture (p.272). A qualitative design offers insight into an
understanding of how a “negotiated intelligibility” of school refusal is constructed within a school district.

The qualitative approach allows for depth and detail in developing a contextual understanding of the social setting (Patton, 2002). This is achieved through the triangulation of multiple data collection methods, which provide a wealth of detailed and rich description increasing the depth of understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 2002). This design allows for an in-depth understanding of how school personnel define school refusal, the social interactions that inform their understanding, and relationships between understanding and behavior. The role of the researcher in this design is important as well.

In a qualitative design, the researcher serves as the instrument for data collection. This is beneficial, as the researcher is flexible, adaptable, and has the ability to process with immediacy and respond (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Reflexivity emphasizes the importance of self-awareness for the researcher and their responsibility to reflect on their role in the research (Burr, 1995; Patton, 2002). The researcher must simultaneously be aware of and document their role in the research process and its effect on the participants.

Triangulation of qualitative research methods captures the multiple layers of how school refusal is conceptualized within the school setting and district. This study employed multiple methods of triangulation, including data and methods triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Data triangulation uses a variety of sources of data, while methods triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods to study a single issue (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002). Likewise, triangulation supports the social constructionist assumption of
multiple realities, as this study sought the multiple perspectives of district level personnel and policies, the school level, and the individual school personnel.

Study Population

The primary focus of this study was school personnel at the district, middle, and high school levels who are employed by the SDSC in the Southeastern United States. At the district level, the focus was on those personnel employed within specific departments under student support services, which includes guidance, social work, psychology, and school health. At the middle and high school level, the study population consisted of principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, social workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, teachers, attendance office staff, and school resource officers.

The sampling strategy differed based on the data collection technique that was used. This section includes a description of the setting in which the study was carried out, inclusion and exclusion criteria for all data collection methods, the sampling strategy for participants in all in-depth semi-structured interviews, starting with elite district level interviews, and for observations and respondents participating in the descriptive survey.

Setting

School district offices, middle schools, and high schools served as the natural setting for interviews. One main office at the district level provided the setting for the elite interviews (described later). It is located in the downtown area of a large metropolitan area.

There are forty middle schools in the SDSC with grades six through eight, and twenty-three high schools that house grades nine through twelve. Middle schools and high schools differ in the number of the indicated personnel. The number of specific
personnel differs from school to school, as some of these positions are itinerate, specifically school psychologists, social workers, and health services staff. Additionally, there are differences due to size of student membership; therefore, high schools have more assistant principals and guidance counselors than middle schools. In middle schools, there are generally two assistant principals, one for curriculum, and the other for administration. The assistant principals in the high school setting include these, as well as additional positions for student affairs. Likewise, there are typically more guidance counselors in the high school setting than in the middle school setting.

All secondary (middle and high) schools in the district are assigned a full-time school resource officer. Based on the schools’ jurisdiction, the resource officer’s operational command is from one of the following: the city police Department or the county sheriff’s department.

**Inclusion Criteria**

School personnel included in the study worked within the district. For interviews, participants were required to be past their first year of employment with the district. The survey, which was sent to principals to be completed, did not require any length of employment, as principals are able to access information to complete the survey more readily regardless of their tenure. Participants included district level personnel in the specified departments, and school level personnel who work in the designated positions at the selected schools.

**Exclusion Criteria**

Personnel at any level (district or school) who were in their first year of employment with the SDSC were excluded from the interviews. For interviews, this was
ascertained via telephone or in person, prior to scheduling an interview. Schools included in the sampling frame excluded alternative schools, elementary schools, K-8 schools, and new schools opening during the 2004-2005 academic year.

Sampling Design

The sampling strategies for this study had multiple levels based on each data collection method. Sampling strategies included stratification, purposefulness, snowball, population sample, and saturation. Sampling was based on the review of literature and the theoretical framework. Previous literature indicated that specific school personnel are likely to be the first individuals to encounter and interact with students experiencing school refusal. The theoretical framework of social constructionism is built on the assumptions that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through social interactions and processes. Likewise, both the literature on school refusal and the theory of social constructionism reference the importance of the social context in which social processes occur. Therefore, the first layer of the sampling design was at the district and school level, with further levels of sampling to select the individual personnel who engage in the social processes within schools.

District Level Elite In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

The elite in-depth interviews were conducted at the district level. Specific departments under the district’s student support services were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is especially relevant when the intention is to select information-rich cases who can illuminate the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). This may also be considered quota sampling, as this is often used to refer to the selection
of sets of key informants who are particularly knowledgeable about this topic of interest (Bernard, 2000).

In this study, detail beyond what is publicly available in regards to district level perceptions and policies related to school refusal was sought. Within student support services, various departments were selected for participation for inclusion in the elite interviews. These included the departments responsible for guidance, social work, psychology, and school health within the district. The second level of sampling for the elite interviews involved the selection of participants who work within the division and the departments. Due to the small number of personnel working in these departments, a population sample was attempted. The maximum sample size possible was twenty-one, based on the number of professional district-level employees at the division level and in the selected departments.

Table 1. Purposeful Sampling Matrix for Elite District Level Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School District of Shermer County</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Division Level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Guidance Services</strong></td>
<td><strong>School Social Work Services</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Professional Staff</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number in cells represents maximum possible interviews based on number of professional staff in each department.

School Level In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted at the school level. Purposeful, stratified random sampling without replacement was used to select schools for participation in the
study (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999a). A purposeful random sample helps to reduce potential selection bias, thus increasing credibility (Patton, 2002). It also adds credibility in the instance of a potential purposeful sample becoming too large to handle (Patton, 2002). It does not however permit generalization, as it is not a representative random sample.

Three levels of stratification were used in sampling: grade level, geographic location, and category of school personnel. Following dichotomization of schools according to grade level (middle or high), they were stratified according to their geographic location. The Shermer County Commission divides the county into four districts. Each district is segmented to represent an equal population size, although one of the districts, which will be referred to as the Center district, is more densely populated with a higher percentage of minorities. An over sample was taken in this particular district (see discussion below). Schools were mapped by their physical location within these geographic districts. Stratification ensured representations of sub-groups, provides for illustration of characteristics of these subgroups, and facilitates comparisons (Bernard, 2000; Patton, 2002). Geographic stratification allowed for representation of schools across the district.

The schools within each geographic stratum were assigned a random number generated through SAS® software, Version 9.1. A program was written in SAS to randomly select one middle school and one high school from each geographic stratum, with the exception of the most densely populated geographic Center district, in which two middle and high schools were selected. This resulted in a minimum sample of ten schools. It was confirmed that none of the schools selected shared itinerate personnel.
(e.g. a school psychologist) of any sort, therefore no additional schools were selected because of that reason. This ensured discrete samples of selected staff. However, two school principals, from both a middle and a high school, declined to allow their school to participate in the study. Both schools were located in the Center district, the more densely populated district in which an over sample had been selected. Two additional schools were then selected randomly from the district who agreed to participate. Lastly, the criterion for saturation was met within data collection in these ten schools, therefore additional schools were not selected for further data collection (see discussion below for description of saturation).

Once the ten schools were randomly selected, a stratified, purposeful sample of school personnel within each school setting was employed. The number of participants per cell was determined by saturation or redundancy. Theoretical saturation or sampling to the point of redundancy refers to the termination of sampling once no new information is emerging from data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While this represents an ideal of sampling in qualitative research, the practicality of using saturation or redundancy as a sole sampling technique is inappropriate for the proposed study due to time constraints and limited resources (Patton, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, saturation was primarily important for the school level interviews. The concept of minimum samples entailed starting with the minimum number expected for reasonable coverage of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). As data collection proceeded, more could have been added to the sample, although this proved not necessary (Patton, 2002). Data collection continued until the point in which no new data constituted the creation of new themes in data analysis.
The purpose of this study was to understand school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal; therefore, even when a participant indicated that they did not know anything about students who refuse to attend school, they still were considered to have the potential to offer valuable insight into how these students are perceived. For all personnel indicated, with the exception of teachers’, interviews were sought based on their availability. Therefore, at each middle and high school, all assistant principals, school psychologists, social workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, attendance office staff, and school resource officers were invited to participate in interviews. Teachers were selected using a snowball sample through referrals obtained during interviews with other school personnel.

Table 2. Purposeful Stratified Random Sampling Matrix for School Level Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level One Stratification: Geographic Location</th>
<th>Level Two Stratification: School Grade Level</th>
<th>Level Three Stratification: Category of School Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Location</td>
<td>District 1</td>
<td>District 2</td>
<td>District 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Personnel within Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principals</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologists</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Workers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Services Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Office Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers in cells represent minimum samples.
**Observation**

The random selection of the ten schools for in-depth interviews automatically determined the selection of schools for observation. Observations were conducted in all schools selected for interviews (see section on School Level In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews).

**Descriptive Self-Administered Survey**

The sampling strategy for the administration of the descriptive survey was simple. A population sample of middle and high school principals was selected. School principals represent the personnel most likely to have access to the information requested within the survey. The desired sample size included sixty-three principals.

**Data Collection Tools**

This study employed three main strategies to collect data on school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal. Various data collection tools were used for data and methods triangulation. The use of these various tools was useful to develop an understanding of the multiple perspectives of school personnel. These strategies included: 1) in-depth, semi-structured interviews of school personnel, with elite interviews at the district level; 2) observation at schools selected to participate in the interviews; and 3) a descriptive, self-administered survey for all middle and high school principals. This section provides an overview of these various data collection tools, the rationale for their use, and the related strengths and weaknesses of each. A separate section reviews the detailed procedures that guided the use of these data collection tools.
In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are the appropriate form of data collection when the intention is to understand another person’s perspective. It is the only method for finding out things that cannot be directly observed, such as perceptions and thoughts (Patton, 2002). Interviews are useful in collecting detailed information. This method also reflects the social constructionist assumption of reflexivity and the role of the researcher in the process of social interaction. The researcher is not a neutral objective individual, but is actively involved in the interview process and the creation of data.

There are three basic approaches to open-ended interviewing: 1) unstructured interviews; 2) semi-structured interviews; and 3) structured interviews (Bernard, 2000). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection at the district and school level to understand how school personnel perceive and socially construct school refusal within the school setting.

Semi-structured interviewing is beneficial when there is only one opportunity for the interview (Bernard, 2000). The interview is conversational, yet the use of an interview guide provides a systematic approach to interviewing different people (Patton, 2002). The interview guide provides an outline for the interview of topics or issues to be covered, but there is flexibility in the order and for probing as the interview progresses (Patton, 2002). The guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data collected, and allows the researcher to anticipate gaps, and be prepared to account for them (Patton, 2002). Weaknesses of this method include: 1) the potential to overlook salient topics, thus producing gaps in the data; and 2) varied sequencing of questions could produce varied responses that decrease comparability (Patton, 2002).
Elite In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

At the district level, the style of semi-structured interviewing that was used is referred to as elite interviewing. Elite interviewing uses a semi-structured interview format, but is useful as a means of data collection to understand political processes surrounding the topic under study (Johnson & Joslyn, 1995). Thus, elite interviews are conducted with those persons in “elite” positions, who may have an in-depth understanding of policies and processes related to a topic (Johnson & Joslyn, 1995).

The strength of elite interviewing is that the researcher is able to access the insider perspectives of persons in positions of authority. This method allows the researcher to maximize the time with the participant, given they are usually busy people who have limited time. Therefore, considerable preparation is required, as the researcher must not ask questions that can be answered elsewhere. This preparation involves the study of existing documents and other publicly available information related to the topic. This can help the researcher interpret and understand the importance of what is being said during the interview, allowing for probing and re-directing. Additionally, the participant may be impressed with the researcher’s sincere interest in the issue, increasing rapport (Johnson & Joslyn, 1995).

Given the strengths of elite interviewing, this method was used when interviewing district level personnel. The researcher thoroughly prepared for interviews and followed a semi-structured interview guide. District level personnel were more likely to be able to illuminate policies related to school refusal in place at the district level. Their perspective on school refusal was important for triangulation of findings at the school level. These
interviews were instrumental in understanding the social construction of school refusal through interactions between the district and school level.

Observations

Observations were conducted at the schools selected for interviews (Patton, 2002). Observations refers to observations conducted in the field that allow the researcher to describe the setting, the activities that take place, and who participates in those activities (Patton, 2002). Observation exists on a continuum of involvement, with the researcher serving as the instrument ranging from full participant to spectator (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 2002). Observations in this study were conducted by the researcher as “observer as participant” or as a spectator (Merriam, 1988). Although this form of observation does not place the researcher as an active participant, their presence in the setting is overt and acknowledged by others within the setting. To a certain degree, the observer’s presence in the setting affects those being observed, despite minimal participation (Patton, 2002). The group is aware of the researcher’s observation activities, and the researcher’s participation is limited to observation (Merriam, 1988).

Observation serves as a key method in qualitative fieldwork. There are several advantages to conducting observations. Observation allows a better understanding of the context within which people in the setting interact (Patton, 2002). Additional strengths of this method include the ability to triangulate the actual setting and the day to day happenings with what is available in written documents and reported verbally, and to move beyond reliance on selective perceptions of others (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 2002). Limitations to observations include the possibility of the observer affecting the situation
being observed in unknown ways, limited in its focus on external behaviors, and constraints from observing limited situations (Patton, 2002).

This method was useful in observing the day-to-day occurrences in key locations within each school, to develop the context of the school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal. Observations also served as a methodological triangulation, allowing insight into interactions and social processes within the school setting, avoiding reliance on verbal data generated from interviews (Patton, 2002).

Observations took place prior to the interviews and continued for an ongoing period once they began. The intention of conducting observations was twofold. The first purpose was to gain trust of the various school personnel who might be interviewed. Prolonged engagement and presence in the school setting allowed the researcher to become accustomed to the school setting and vice versa (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Habituation refers to the relaxation of behaviors after the participants adjust to the new person in the setting, in this instance when school personnel adjust to the researcher’s presence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By conducting the observations prior to interviews and for an ongoing period throughout data collection, school personnel became familiar with the researcher (described in detail later). In some instances this may have increased the comfort level and rapport during interviews. Development of thick and rich description of the interactions of students, parents, and school personnel in these various school settings adds to the transferability of the study, while the prolonged engagement increases credibility.
Descriptive Self-Administered Survey

The Survey of School Refusal, originally developed by Stickney and Miltenberger (1998), was used. The survey contains 13 items designed to gather information regarding school size, community setting, presence of a school refusal identification system, person responsible for identifying school refusal, characteristics of school refusal, and steps taken in response to individuals engaging in school refusal (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

The survey contains a combination of opened and closed ended questions designed to generate descriptive data that describes the middle and high school level response to school refusal and provides another point for triangulation of data and methods (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999b). The use of a descriptive self-administered survey relies on written instructions that are clear and concise and do not require further clarification.

This is an appropriate method for the school principals, as they are a literate population, the survey does not require a large time commitment, and it is likely that the response rate will be high (Bernard, 2000). It is also appropriate because the questions do not require a face-to-face format (Bernard, 2000). The advantages of using a self-administered survey includes that it can be sent to a large group, it has relatively low cost, and is based on a standard set of questions, thus limiting interviewer bias (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999b). Given that this survey was delivered via mail, the major weakness is response rate (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999b). In an attempt to increase response rates, the Dillman method (2000) guided the survey procedures, as is discussed in the section on data collection procedures.
Data Collection Procedures

The following section provides a detailed plan of how data collection was operationalized. Details regarding the levels of permission required to conduct the study are provided. The section outlines the following: 1) a general overview of procedures for all interviews; 2) a detailed description of the interviews at the district and school levels, including participant recruitment methods; 3) an explanation of the procedures for observations; and 4) a plan for the descriptive survey. This section also provides information regarding pre-testing, the external review, and pilot testing of the interview guides, extraction/review tool, observation guide, and descriptive survey. Additionally, this section reviews tape-recording, confidentiality, field notes, transcription, and non-participation. The period for data collection began at the end of the Spring 2004 school semester and continued through the following Spring 2005 semester (Appendix B – Timeline for Data Collection).

Levels of Permission, Negotiations, and Entry

Prior to the start of this research, several levels of permission were required. In qualitative research, this is often referred to as entry into the field (Patton, 2002). This occurs in two separate but related stages. The first is negotiation with gatekeepers, and the second is the actual physical entry into the setting (Patton, 2002). The stages are related as the initial negotiation sets the stage for the rules and conditions for entry into the field (Patton, 2002).

First, permission to use the survey by Stickney and Miltenberger (1998) was sought and granted via email communication with one of the original authors (Appendix C – Approval to Use The Survey of School Refusal). This was important to establish
prior to seeking permission to conduct the study. The first level was the University of South Florida’s (USF) Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB application was submitted prior to initiating the study.

The second level was the School District of Shermer County. Prior to submitting an application to request permission to conduct research, meetings were conducted with key gatekeepers at the district level. Tentative verbal approval was granted. An official request for research was submitted, and approval was granted.

The third level of permission became important once access had been granted to conduct the study in the district. This level is represented by the individual schools that were selected for observations and interviews. School principals were contacted first by an introduction letter, followed by a phone call to schedule individual meetings. In most cases, a series of phone calls occurred between the researcher and the principal’s secretary before a meeting was set. Meetings were often scheduled with the principal via the secretary. Only three principals scheduled meetings from the researcher’s initial contact. Principals were provided with a brief overview of the study, letters documenting permission to conduct research in the district, and a letter of support from a district level official.

Permission to conduct observation and interviews was sought from principals. A signed informed consent documented that the principal of each school granted permission for their school and personnel to participate. Permission and support of the principal is important in any research conducted in a school based setting (Billington, Washington, & Trickett, 1981).
The researcher also sought permission to attend a faculty meeting at the beginning of the Fall semester to be introduced to the faculty and staff. This was in an attempt to assist personnel in recognizing the researcher as someone who not only has permission to be in the school setting, but has support from the principal as well. One middle school principal agreed that attending the faculty meeting was important; whereas other principals agreed to communicate their support of the researcher to their personnel via intra-office memorandums and email. In a few instances (N=3 high schools), principals requested that the researcher meet with the assistant principal of the school, as their schedule did not permit enough time, despite most meetings lasting an average of ten minutes.

In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual participants were contacted to schedule interviews. All participants completed an informed consent agreement. The semi-structured interviews lasted for an hour on average. No interviews were scheduled with less than an hour between, as the researcher needed time to review tapes and notes. The location and time was scheduled at the convenience of the participant. The location for interviews included participants’ place of work in a private office, empty meeting, conference room, or classroom, faculty lounge, or school clinic.

All school personnel were provided a general definition, although the term school refusal will not be used. Participants were told that the study is about their perceptions of “students who refuse to attend school for various unexplained reasons” (Kearney, 2001) and “students who have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire
day” (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998, p.162). The intention was to understand how school personnel, at all levels, conceptualize this phenomenon.

The researcher assumed the stance of knowing nothing. In many cases, participants would make comments to the researcher indicating that she probably “knew more than they did about what made students refuse school.” In these cases, the researcher, in order to re-position her power as an “expert” from the perspective of the participant, would indicate that she had never worked in a school setting, and considered school personnel the experts and most appropriate group to speak with to gather information on their opinions. In the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to talk about why students do not come to school. This was intended to get the participant talking and comfortable. They were also asked about what makes it difficult for students to come, and what makes it difficult for them to remain in school all day. They were then asked for more and more stories about students who refuse to attend school.

All interviews followed an interview guide that provided a flexible structure with key issues to cover during the interview (Appendix D – General Interview Guide). The research questions, theory, and literature informed the development of the guide. Probing was used throughout the interview to elicit further details related to information provided (Appendix E – Probes for Interviewing). A demographic sheet was completed for each participant at the end of the interview, collecting information such as official title, years of experience, educational background, gender, age, and ethnicity (Appendix F – Demographic Information Sheet).

Data was collected using two methods: tape-recording and jottings. All participants were asked for permission to be tape-recorded to assure quality of data.
collection. They were made aware prior to scheduling the interview that it would be tape-recorded. Only in two cases did participants decline to be tape-recorded. Both participants verbalized concern that they would not be inclined to share fully their views if they knew a tape-recorded record would exist. In these cases, the researcher agreed to take notes. Notes were taken as close to verbatim as possible, and immediately following these interviews, the researcher went to a quiet location, and typed up a transcript based on her notes.

Likewise, several times after the end of an interview, a participant would remember something. This was usually after the researcher had packed up her equipment. In these cases, the researcher would jot down notes, and immediately go to a private location and tape-record these notes onto the interview tape, so the added information would be included in transcription.

Jottings, or field notes taken during the interview, were recorded in a small notebook (Bernard, 1994). The purpose was to relay ideas to paper to transcribe later into field notes. As soon as possible following each interview, the researcher listened to the tape and reviewed field notes to fill in any missing parts. No interviews were scheduled with less than an hour between them, to allow time for reflection and regrouping.

District Level Elite Interviews

At the district level, a series of elite interviews were conducted with personnel who are experienced and knowledgeable within the district setting. The intention was to gain an understanding of how school refusal is conceptualized at the district level. The district level personnel have inside information on programs and policies that are related, both directly and indirectly, to school refusal and how it is addressed.
Elite interviews took place prior to the school level interviews and observations in an effort to have advanced knowledge of existing programs that may affect school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal (i.e., the bullying prevention program).

Prior to interviewing, the researcher was informed on various policies and programs of the School District of Shermer County as well as relevant state statutes dealing with school policies related to attendance. Examples of information reviewed include the district’s website, student handbook, school board policy manual, and the student progression plan. In addition, state statutes related to school attendance and related issues were reviewed. Institutional documents served to prepare the researcher for the elite interviews, while at the same time offering insight into another aspect of the socially constructed realities that emerge from the social context of schools (Miller, 1997). The use of a review guide/extraction tool was used to ensure systematic review of each document (Appendix G– Document Extraction Tool).

Recruitment for district level elite interviews. A pre-notice packet of information was mailed to specified district level personnel. This packet contained a letter introducing the researcher, describing the study, and indicating that they would receive a telephone call within the next week to schedule an interview. A brightly hued reminder card was included with the researcher’s contact information in the event that the participant wished to initiate contact. The packet also included the letter of permission from the school district and the letter of support from the district level official. Interviews were scheduled via telephone at the convenience and desired location of the participant. On average, it took two attempts to contact participants to schedule an interview.
School Level Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with personnel from the randomly selected schools. The school personnel recruited for interviews included assistant principals, school psychologists, social workers, health services staff, guidance counselors, teachers, attendance office staff, and school resource officers. There was an effort to collect data from personnel in similar positions across schools (i.e., assistant principals) in a shorter time frame to assist in determining theoretical saturation, although this was not always possible. Within schools, time between interviews was not less than an hour.

Recruitment for school level interviews. The initial contact with school personnel took place during the first two weeks of observations or during the initial meeting with the main school contact (principal or assistant principal). All potential participants were provided a packet of information similar to the one sent to school district personnel. This packet was placed in the various personnel’s mailbox at the school or hand-delivered at the beginning of the observation period or when introduced by the school contact. The letter explained the observation time being spent in the school, and indicated that during this time, the researcher would contact them via telephone or in person to schedule a future interview. Many personnel initiated contact with the researcher via email. This proved to be the most effective method of contacting and scheduling interviews with school personnel. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience and desired location of the participant. A little more than half of personnel scheduled interviews upon the initial contact. Remaining interviews were scheduled after an average of two contacts attempts. Once interviews began, recommendations for interviews with teachers were sought.
Teachers were contacted via email, as telephone access is difficult given the amount of time they spend in a classroom. Participants were asked at the end of their interview if they would refer the researcher to a classroom teacher who might be interested in participating in the study. The researcher then provided teachers with a packet of information and followed-up accordingly.

Observations

Observations were carried out at each school selected for interviews. Permission was sought to conduct interviews during the initial meeting with principals (see section on Levels of Permission). A total of 36 hours of observation time was split among the ten schools. Observations commenced two weeks prior to interviewing. The observations were intense with the researcher at times observing two different schools each day or one school for an entire 1-2 day period. The decision to conduct daylong observations within one school setting was intentional. It allowed comprehensive observations of the full day as opposed to short intervals. Sometimes, when staying for longer periods, the researcher was able to see repeated interactions between the same students and personnel. For example, in one school, the same student re-appeared in all three locations throughout the day. Times were alternated, so if observations were taken in the morning at one school in one location, they would be taken in the afternoon as well, to capture variations between these times within the school setting.

Three locations were to be observed in each school for one-hour periods, although it was discovered that some locations have very little student or school personnel traffic flow, therefore time was decreased in these locations (i.e., the guidance office). Locations for observations included the attendance office, school clinic or nurse’s office, and the
guidance office. These various locations deal with the arrival of students at school and at times issues related to attendance. Locations within schools were alternated, so that the researcher observed each at least twice. Once interviewing at the schools commenced, each school had been observed for approximately six hours.

Field notes were taken to document observations. To aid in observations, a guide was developed that assisted the researcher in systematic documentation (Appendix H – Observation Guide). This guide included a list of elements and questions that helped the researcher stay focused on the setting (Merriam, 1988). Elements included the setting, the participants, activities and interactions, frequency and duration, and subtle factors.

**Descriptive Self-Administered Survey**

The Survey of School Refusal was mailed to all middle and high school principals to collect descriptive data on the schools’ response to school refusal. Participants were asked to provide information regarding school refusal from the previous school year (2003-2004). To increase response rates, the Dillman method was employed (Dillman, 2000). A response rate of 70% was sought, although 60% would be acceptable. The final response rate was 61% (N=38).

School principals were mailed a pre-letter via first class mail accompanied by the SDSC approval letter to conduct the study and the USF IRB approval (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999b). A waiver of written documentation of informed consent was obtained for the survey, therefore a confidentiality statement was provided within the cover letter. An informed consent was provided, but signature was not required. The letter explained the survey and informed the respondent that the survey would be mailed in a week. The survey was sent a week after mailing the pre-letter (Appendix I – Survey of School
Refusal). The survey was professional in appearance with a front and back cover (Dillman, 2000). It included a cover letter that provided a general definition of school refusal, information on confidentiality, and researcher contact information (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999b). The letter also included a statement that acknowledged that help may be needed in obtaining the data necessary to complete the survey, which is okay, but it is preferred that the principal be the person to physically complete it.

The survey was printed on colored paper with the intention of making it stand out. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included for convenience. All correspondence was sent in large, white envelopes via priority mail. A reminder postcard was mailed one week after the survey was sent. Two weeks after the postcard was mailed, another cover letter and survey was sent to participants who had not yet responded, along with a note explaining that their survey had not been received and stating how important it is for them to participate (Bernard, 2000). These were sent certified mail.

A tracking and coding system was used to distinguish who returned surveys, when surveys were returned, who required follow-up, and who did not respond. Surveys were printed in two different colors, one color for middle school principals, and the other for high school principals. A small number code was assigned to each school, and affixed in the inside corner of the last page of each survey to track non-response.

Pre-testing, External Review, and Pilot Testing

Pre-testing of the interview guides and survey was conducted with schoolteachers enrolled in a college level course. All participants completed an informed consent. The interview guide for school personnel and the survey was tested with 2-4 participants for each. Pre-testing involved the think-aloud protocol for both the survey and the interview
guide (Patton, 2002). This process aims to elicit verbally the cognitive processes that elucidate what someone is thinking when asked a question (Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to think aloud as they read and completed the survey. They were asked questions on comprehension, clarity, and conciseness of questions (Appendix J – Pre-testing Protocol). At the end of the interview, demographic information was collected for each participant. Pre-testing findings are summarized briefly in Appendix K.

The interview guides were updated based on pre-testing findings prior to pilot testing, external panel review, and data collection (Appendix L – External Review Panel).

Prior to conducting interviews, the guides and instruments were pilot tested with various school personnel and revised as necessary. Participants for pilot testing were recruited via a snowball sample of school personnel from a middle school, high school, and the district level in Sarasota County Public Schools. The total sample size included ten participants. The goal was to obtain representation of each category of school personnel at the school level, and at least one participant from the district level personnel. Pilot testing was conducted with the school and district level interview guides, the observation tool, and the survey.

Interviews were conducted to check the guides for flow, comprehensibility, and appropriateness. Pilot findings are summarized briefly in Appendix M. Following the pilot, the interview guide, observation guide, and descriptive survey were submitted to the external panel. This panel included a school expert, a school refusal expert, and a qualitative research methodologist. Changes were made based on recommendations provided by the panel, although they were not extensive. Given the minimal changes
recommended by the external panel, pilot testing was officially concluded and no further interviews were conducted.

The document review tool was provided to a volunteer along with a sample of a document. The volunteer and the principal investigator both used the instrument and compared the results to determine reliability of the tool. The same process was used with the observation guide. An hour of observation was conducted within one location within a Sarasota school setting; the attendance office, which was locate within the student affairs office.

Two principals of Sarasota schools were asked to complete the survey and provide feedback on clarity of directions, time required to complete, and the resources required to complete it. Only one principal returned the survey and feedback was minimal. Final content changes to the interview guides, document review tool, observation guide, and survey were submitted to the USF IRB in the form of an IRB modification.

Levels of Confidentiality

All participants in the study were asked to sign IRB approved informed consent agreements. No identifying information was recorded on tape or transcripts. Other potentially identifying material, such as the informed consents, has been kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office with access restricted to the principal investigator. Due to the limited boundaries and sampling procedures for this study, the principal investigator is limited in describing certain settings and participants, to protect confidentiality. Therefore, schools selected for the study are not revealed. Additionally, pseudonyms have been used when describing settings and personnel. Pseudonyms do not reflect the
actual gender of the participant, however their actual position and level is reported for
descriptive and comparative purposes.

Field Notes

Field notes on data collection and analysis were operationalized using a daily log,
jottings, and three forms of field notes. A daily log consists of what was planned and
expected for each day of data collection including things to accomplish versus what
actually happened (Bernard, 1994, 2000). Using a blank notebook, double pages for each
day were dated in advance, with the left page documenting the scheduled events for the
day, and the right side documenting the actual occurrences that day (Bernard, 1994,
2000). Additionally, the researcher carried a small notebook at all times. This was useful
for taking quick notes on any informal, unplanned conversations with personnel. Jottings
were also useful to document ideas, thoughts, or information related to the research that
arises unexpectedly (Bernard, 2000).

Field notes include descriptive, methodological, and analytical notes (Bernard,
2000). All notes were kept in separate Microsoft Office Word files within separate folders
and recorded daily. Each file was titled appropriately and dated. During each interview,
jottings or field notes were taken in as much detail as possible. Observations were
recorded as descriptive field notes, with the use of an observation guide.

Methodological field notes included anything that deals with data collection
techniques, such as interviewing methods that worked well (Bernard, 2000). Analytical
notes were used to document reflections, ideas, and theories that emerge from the data
as it is collected and analyzed (Bernard, 2000). In addition to field notes, a personal
journal was maintained to record any personal reflections that arose during the research
process. Field notes were reviewed during data analysis to provide reminders, contextual information, and details.

**Tape-Recording**

Prior to the start of all interviews, participants were asked for permission to tape-record. A tape-recorder with a small, non-descript microphone was used. Ninety minute tapes were used for each interview. At the beginning of each interview, the tape recorder was checked to make sure it was properly functioning. At the beginning of data collection, this was done by recording a verbal “stamp” of the date and some additional information with the participant present, as it was thought it might increase their comfort with the tape-recorder. However, after observing body language and facial expressions among participants that appeared to indicate some uneasiness, this was done prior to meeting with the participant. Additional tapes were kept on hand in the event the interview exceeds the estimated time. Immediately following the interview, the tape was checked to make sure it recorded the interview. Tapes were labeled and used for transcription. In the event that a participant refused to be tape-recorded, the interview proceeded and the researcher made a concentrated effort to capture most of the conversation in notes. Immediately after the interview, the researcher typed out the details of the interview.

**Transcription**

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exception of two interviews in which the participants refused to be tape-recorded. In those two cases, copious notes were taken by the researcher and transcribed immediately after the interview. All other interviews were sent out for transcription into *Microsoft Office*
Upon receipt of transcripts they were compared with tapes to check for accuracy. A coding and filing system was used for all field notes, so they were matched with interview transcripts for data analysis. All transcripts were transferred into Ethnograph® v.5.08, which is the qualitative software program that was used in data analysis (Scolari Qualis Research Associates, 2001). Ethnograph is useful for conducting rapid searches of large amounts of text, applying codes to chunks of text, and then sorting text by codes.

Debriefing

Debriefing was conducted on a regular basis with a peer to identify any evident biases and clarify interpretations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Debriefing sessions were conducted at three time points during data collection. The first session took place after ten interviews were completed, the second after twenty interviews, and the final when interviews were complete. Debriefing included discussion of the data collection procedures, review of the types of data that were being generated, and an examination of the experiences of the researcher. Towards the end of data collection, review of emergent themes, data analysis, and interpretation were included in this process.

Prior to each debriefing, the interviewer provided an independent researcher who was familiar with the study a sample of interview tapes to review. The researcher listened to the tapes, focusing on possible researcher bias, leading, participant reactivity, and other possible problems in the data collection. This was done again in the middle of the data collection phase and at the end. The last debriefing session included a sample of interview tapes from various points throughout so that the independent researcher could check for consistency as well as the previously mentioned issues. Additionally, the last
debriefing included transcripts and the initial data analysis codebook, so that the independent researcher could try coding some of the transcripts. This allowed the researcher to compare the reliability of the coding process.

This allowed an outside perspective of the research, served as a credibility and dependability check, and provided an outlet for the researcher to express her ideas and reactions to conducting the study.

*Non-Participation*

At the district level, participation was limited within certain departments. This was due in part to gatekeepers who placed parameters on who would and would not be allowed to participate in an interview. Due to confidentiality issues, descriptive details cannot be provided regarding the district level.

At the school level, two school principals (middle and high school) declined to allow their school to participate in the study. Both schools were located in urban areas. The middle school principal simply declined to participate, whereas the high school principal indicated that the school was too busy assisting other researchers. Neither principal contacted the researcher directly. Additional schools were selected randomly from the remaining schools.

When the researcher was allowed access to a school, most eligible participants within the school were more than willing to participate. Out of the 107 school personnel invited to participate in interviews, 25 were non-participants. Non-participants were mostly female (N=19) and split between middle school (N=12) and high school (N=13). Non-participants included the following categories of school personnel: secretaries (N=8); resource officers/deputies (N=4); teachers (N=4); assistant principals (N=3);
health assistants (N=2); school psychologists (N=2); and a guidance counselor and a social worker.

Reasons for non-participation were attained in only a handful of cases, whereas for the most part non-participation was determined by non-response following repeated contacts. Some of the reasons offered for non-participation included, “I am not good at these kinds of things [interviews],” and “I really don’t have any experience with students that have school refusal.” Three non-participants actually scheduled interviews, did not make their appointment, and then failed to respond to follow-up efforts to re-schedule.

Non-participation in the Survey of School Refusal was identified by the lack of response following a reminder postcard and a follow-up survey. There were 24 out of 68 schools that did not participate, 15 of which were middle schools. In four cases, the researcher was informed the school would not participate. One school had the follow-up survey returned to sender, while another used the postage paid envelope provided by the researcher to send back a note indicating they would not participate. Two schools placed telephone calls to indicate they would not participate, one of which indicated that their principal “did not do surveys.”

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis

Based on the exploratory design, the study used a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, which includes iterative and inductive processes requiring the researcher to move from identifying themes and categories to larger concepts and patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Within the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis, a constant comparative method
of systematically examining, comparing, and refining emerging categories and themes was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach to data analysis includes several steps:

1. transcription and reading of interviews
2. identification of emergent themes or categories
3. pull together data consistent with themes and compare
4. think about relationships and patterns among themes
5. construct theory comparing it against data
6. present results that exemplify the theory (Bernard, 2000).

Data analysis consisted of several stages, including analytical thoughts during data collection, open coding, in-vivo coding (uses words of the participant), deductive coding, and interpretation (Bernard, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis began during data collection with the formation of ideas during data collection, which were documented as field notes (Patton, 2002). Throughout data collection, interviews were reviewed as part of a data analysis. This guided the researcher in the continued process of interviewing as well as in identifying emerging themes within the data. This represents the first level of data analysis.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and entered into a laptop computer. Transcripts were then loaded into Ethnograph® v.5.08, a software package that allows the numbering, coding, and sorting of text. Transcripts for each interview were then printed and read (see Figure 1). Transcripts were read in groups stratified by level and category of personnel. For example, all of the district level interviews were read consecutively, and then all middle school level guidance counselor interviews, followed
by high school guidance counselor interviews, and so on. This was to allow for within
and across group comparisons or patterns to begin to emerge.

Figure 1

Sample Printout of a Transcript in Ethnograph v5.08

| Interview #079; 3/8/05 | 1 |
| +020 Teacher | 2 |
| Middle School, Female, | 3 |
| Location: Her classroom | 4 |
| I = Interviewer R = Respondent | 6 |

INTERVIEW BEGINS: 8

I: Can you tell me why you think kids don't come to school? 9

R: I think there are a variety of reasons. It's funny because teachers discuss this I think a lot more than people outside of school would think. 10 12 13 14 15

Open and in-vivo coding were used during this first reading to begin identifying main categories within the interviews (Bernard, 2000). This represents the second level of analysis. From this initial review of the data, the researcher developed an initial codebook. This was reviewed with an independent researcher during the final debriefing.

The third level of analysis involved deductive coding, using the created codebook to code transcripts of individual in Ethnograph (see Figure 2). This was also done according to level and category of personnel. The codebook was updated as new categories emerged or collapsed into other categories. When the codebook was altered, previously coded transcripts were re-coded.
Figure 2

Sample Printout of Inserted Codes

| Interview #079; 3/8/05 | 1 |
| +020 Teacher          | 2 |
| Middle School, Female,| 3 |
| Location: Her classroom| 4 |
| I = Interviewer R = Respondent | 6 |

#-ATTEND $-PROCESS

INTERVIEW BEGINS: 8 -#-$

I: Can you tell me why you think kids don't come to school? 9 |

%-REASONS

R: I think there are a variety of reasons. It's funny because teachers discuss this I think a lot more than people outside of school would think. 12 |

I: Tell me more. 17 |

R: We talk about the kids and their attendance regularly, because we notice ... if a kid is absent like 3 or 4 days in a row that becomes a concern for us, you know? Have you heard from the parents? Do you know if they're sick? Do you know if they're 19 |

After all codes were entered into Ethnograph. Coded transcripts were then sorted by code and within each code by level (district, middle, or high school) and category of personnel (see Figure 3). These codes were then printed and physical files were created for each category, with folders representing each code within the category. The next level of analysis involved reviewing data and comparing within and across themes.
The analysis of the sorted categories and sub-groups entailed three levels of analysis. One focused on the first research objective, which is describing school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal. The second level focused on understanding how these perceptions influence the methods and strategies utilized by individual schools.
and their district to prevent, identify, and manage school refusal. The third level of analysis was to examine similarities and differences by level and category of personnel. Final analysis involved the use of all data points, including district and school interviews, observations, survey data, and field notes.

Memoing was an ongoing process during all phases of analysis. Notes were maintained on observations that occurred during reading and coding of transcripts. These notes were divided into three categories: code notes (coding process), theory notes (ideas about what is appearing), and operational notes (practicalities) (Bernard, 2000). Memos were recorded directly into Ethnograph®, which has a function for attaching memos throughout transcripts during the coding process. Memos were used in conducting the analysis, writing the final report, and for documenting the process.

For reliability purposes, an independent researcher was provided with a sample of qualitative data to review and code for analysis (Patton, 2002). The principal investigator and independent researcher then met to discuss the sample, reconcile the codes, and reach a consensus. Throughout analysis, several appointments to discuss emergent themes were conducted with a colleague to provide an external perspective.

Analysis of the Survey

The Survey of School Refusal provided mainly descriptive data. Survey responses were recorded in a Microsoft® Office Excel 2003 spreadsheet. Data were then screened to ensure accurate data entry and valid responses. Existing variables were manipulated to prepare for the analysis. This included renaming, creating, and recoding variables as necessary to achieve analytic goals. Univariate and bivariate statistical procedures were implemented using SAS version 9.1.3 to describe survey results. This
data is used to present a broad picture of school refusal in the district, the school level response, and processes.

Interpretation

Interpretation of the data is a process that involves going beyond description of the data (Patton, 2002). It represents the culminating phase of data analysis. Interpretation is to make speculative statements and conclusions regarding the themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Bernard, 2000). Interpretation from a social constructionist perspective involves reflexivity of the researcher while moving between the data and their interpretation of that data (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) cites that the “challenge of qualitative inquiry involves portraying a holistic picture of what the phenomenon, setting, program is like and struggling to understand the fundamental nature of a particular set of activities of people in a specific context” (p.480).

Interpretation involved a thorough review of patterns and theories that emerged from data analysis. Interpretation of data was intertwined with the process of data analysis. The process of interpreting results involved writing up “chunks” of results for each developing theme, which then were compared against other themes and patterns. Several perspectives informed interpretation of the data including the researcher, the theoretical framework of the study, the research questions, and the previous literature (LeCompte, 2000). The results of interpretation provide a contextual perspective of the research findings with insight into the significance of those findings. In addition, speculation about meanings, possible explanations, and formulations of hypotheses are offered.
To provide credibility of data, member checks with a purposeful sample of 3-5 interview participants were conducted. This involved providing a copy of the interview transcript to the selected participants and asking them whether it was representative of the conversation we had during the interview. Four out of five participants responded and all indicated that the transcripts were accurate representations of our interviews. One participant offered comments about some information they wished removed from the transcript as they felt it was potentially identifiable.

Trustworthiness and Quality in Qualitative Research

The major emphasis in qualitative research design is on quality and credibility, as opposed to measurement validity in quantitative research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). While quantitative methodology attempts to control threats to internal validity, qualitative perspectives accept that there is potential for this to occur, and therefore try to control and prepare for it, and most importantly document it (Patton, 2002). The paradigmatic lens through which research is viewed guides the methods and techniques for enhancing the quality and credibility of the findings (Merriam, 1995). Therefore, the theoretical framework of social constructionism plays an important role in determining the criteria for credibility of this study. This study will use criteria for judging rigor stemming from the qualitative tradition.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that credibility, dependability, and transferability can be combined to increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Credibility is the most important factor in establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).
Patton (2002) cited three elements that credibility depends on: 1) rigorous methods; 2) credibility of the researcher; and 3) philosophical belief in the value of qualitative research (p.553). Rigor in qualitative research refers to systematic techniques for data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). Credibility of the researcher refers to the training, experience, and presentation of self (Patton, 2002). In addition, the social constructionist perspective would include the reflexivity of the researcher as an aspect of credibility (Burr, 1995). The philosophical belief in qualitative research is demonstrated through the ability to provide the value, rationale, and appropriateness of using qualitative inquiry.

**Credibility**

*Credibility* is considered the analog to the quantitative concept of internal validity. Internal validity refers to whether a researcher is truly measuring what they think they are measuring, whereas credibility focuses on whether one’s findings are congruent with the reality in which the data emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1995). Various methods were used to increase the credibility of this study, including rigorous data collection and analysis, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, thick description, triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1995; Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). All data collection methods were systematically conducted and documented.

Prolonged engagement over the Fall semester allowed acceptance and trust building within the school settings. Persistent observation allowed the development of thick description, to capture the setting within which the data was collected (Patton, 2002). Triangulation of various data sources, the various district school personnel, and
triangulation of the methods, interviews, observations, and a survey, sought to capture the multiplicity of perspectives. This also provided rigor for the theoretical framework of social constructionism, as it acknowledges and accounts for multiple realities that may exist.

Verbatim transcription of interviews and the use of the language of the participants were used to capture the participants constructed realities. Member checks involved taking the data back to the participants to see if the transcripts resonated with them. This was conducted with a sample of the study participants. To triangulate this aspect of credibility, peer debriefing was also used. This was achieved by the use of an independent researcher or colleague reviewing the data analysis and findings and providing comments on their plausibility.

Reflexivity is an important aspect of credibility as it is a way to account for the role of the researcher. It reminds the qualitative researcher to observe herself, her perspective and voice, and its role in the research. Reflexivity involves acknowledging the biases and limitations of the researcher brought to the study. All biases, limitations, and other personal insights during the study were documented in a reflexive personal journal.

Social constructionism calls for reflexivity in the role of the researcher. It includes taking into consideration the role of power in how meaning is constructed (Burr, 1995). The triangulation of methods helped in capturing the multiple voices of personnel in different levels of power. This also takes into consideration the effects the researcher has on the setting and the participants in the setting. It also refers to the researcher’s subjective experience in the research. The researcher was attentive to and documented all
distortions arising from their presence in the settings, involvement with the participants, biases of the researcher, and from data collection techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An example of this was the frequent comment heard from participant, “Well, you are the expert.” The researcher attempted to re-position her role as a perceived expert by indicating she has no experience in school settings, and that she herself considers the school personnel the experts, hence the reason for the interviews. However, the use of prolonged engagement, trust-building, positive first impressions did help to safeguard against these distortions, while field notes, and a reflexive journal was used for documentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

*Dependability* is similar to reliability, except that while reliability is concerned with the extent that research findings will be found again, dependability focuses on whether the results found are consistent with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1995; Patton, 2002). Previously described methods, such as triangulation and peer examination, can increase the dependability of a study. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the use of an audit trail. The audit trail consists of thorough documentation of everything done within the study so that another person could replicate the study. This study maintained comprehensive documentation using various types of field notes, a journal, and memoing. Additionally, all files, documents, and all other related materials were maintained with an organized system. Tracking forms and protocol sheets were created to document all aspects of data collection on an on-going basis.
Transferability

Transferability, the parallel to external validity, refers to whether findings in one context are applicable in another setting, given that there is congruence between those contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While external validity refers to generalizing findings to broad populations, transferability builds on the rich description of the particular and context specific (Merriam, 1995). Strategies suggested for strengthening this aspect of rigor include thick description, sampling within, and reader or user generalizability (Merriam, 1995; Patton, 2002). Thick description involved the development of detailed description of all information related to the study, although some of this description is limited to protect confidentiality of those involved in the study. Field notes were essential to the development of this description. Sampling within refers to the inclusion of multiple parts or components within the study (Merriam, 1995). This was accomplished through various data collection methods with delineated sampling strategies, and sampling within samples, such as the sampling of school personnel within selected schools. Reader or user generalizability refers to the role of the consumer of the research findings in deciding whether they apply to another setting.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A major strength of this study is the use of qualitative methodology, grounded in the constructionist perspective, to understand the social construction of school refusal within the context of a school district. The use of triangulated, qualitative methods including in-depth interviews, observations, and a descriptive survey, allowed insight into the perspectives of school personnel regarding school refusal. The sampling strategies used ensure representation of the various personnel selected. Observations provided the
development of thick contextual description of the school settings. The use of the language of the participants ensured that the authentic voice of the participants is represented. Both the methods and theory used in this study introduce an innovative approach to research on school refusal, drawing on a paradigm that rarely informs such research. The study represents one of the few studies on school refusal originating from perspectives of both public and school health. This study has the potential to make significant contributions to the existing knowledge on school refusal.

One of the weaknesses of this study is the reliance on predominantly self-reported data. Whereas triangulation accounts for some of this weakness, it remains a challenge in qualitative research. The social constructionist perspective not only allows the entrance of subjectivity into research, it is encouraged as it represents part of the social process. Within social constructionism there is no “objectivity.” It asserts what people believe is “real” is real; it is real in its consequences.

The study draws on an extensive, but simultaneously limited literature and research base. The previous literature on school refusal is limited to select populations, unclear definitions, and studies with poor internal validity. Yet, this lends support that this may represent a phenomenon that is in fact a social construction. The study is limited in its transferability, as it focuses on a specified school district. Thus, the findings of this study may be applied to a similar setting, but not necessarily to the larger population of school personnel. Despite the limitations, the findings of this study provide insight and direction for future research and training.
Methodology Definitions

1. Qualitative research – an additional definition for qualitative research is “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 10). It is research where words are not reduced to numerical representations.

2. In-depth, semi-structured interviews – Semi-structured interviews are one-on-one interviews that involve the use of a semi-structured interview. The guide is a written list of key questions and topics that need to be covered, usually in a certain order. They are in-depth in that it allows the researcher to ask questions that generate detailed responses. The semi-structured nature of the interview provides flexibility for the researcher to follow leads as they see appropriate. Adhering to the key questions of the guide also allow the development of reliable and consistent qualitative data (Bernard, 2000; Patton, 2002).

3. Observation – A strategic method in ethnographic research, observation is a method that puts the researcher in the setting and allows them to collect the data firsthand through the use of their senses. Observation exists on a continuum, ranging from the complete participant to the complete observer. Bernard (2000) considers complete observation as separate from participant observation, whereas Patton (2002) describes it as part of participant observation, even if the observations involve minimal to no active participation.

4. Exploratory research – is conducted in new fields of study or in areas of study where little work has been done (Patton, 2002). Typically little is know about the nature of the phenomenon, and few hypotheses exist (Patton, 2002). It is also a useful
approach in expanding research that has been conducted within the confines of a single paradigm.

5. Triangulation – There are various forms of triangulation. Data triangulation is the use of a variety of data sources. Investigator triangulation refers to the use of several different researchers. Theory triangulation involves the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data. Methodological triangulation is the use of multiple methods to study a single problem (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002).

6. Stratification – A method employed within sampling that involves dividing a sampling frame into sub-frames to ensure representation of the populations represented by the sub-frames (Bernard, 2000).

7. Purposeful sampling – refers to the selection of cases for study that are information rich. Typically, there are criteria developed to guide selection (Patton, 2002).

8. Snowball sampling – locating participants who provide names of people who might be likely participants for the study (Bernard, 2000, p. 179).

9. Theoretical saturation – It is referred to as the termination of sampling once no new information is emerging from data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strauss and Corbin (1998) define theoretical saturation as “the point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis” (p.143). This is the point where categories are “saturated” and collecting more data becomes not productive.

10. Random sampling without replacement – When conducting random sampling, putting the numbers back into the pool of possible selections after it has been selected is referred to as random sampling with replacement. This method maintains an equal
probability of being selected among those in the pool. If it is not replaced, then the odds of being selected go up (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999a).

11. Elite interviews - Elite interviews are conducted with those persons in “elite” positions, who may have an in-depth understanding of policies and processes related to a topic (Johnson & Joslyn, 1995). The strength of elite interviewing is that it allows access to the insider perspectives of persons in positions of authority. This method allows the researcher to maximize the time with the participant, given they are usually busy people who have limited time. Therefore, considerable preparation is required so as not to ask questions that can be answered elsewhere.


13. Grounded theory – This refers to theory that is derived from data that have been systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. It starts with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
CHAPTER IV: 
RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the results of the data collected from the district and school level in-depth semi-structured interviews with school personnel to answer several research questions. The theoretical framework of social constructionism guided the research methodology used to answer these research questions. This chapter also presents the results from the Survey of School Refusal, which collected descriptive data from middle and high schools. In the initial section of this chapter, I revisit a description of the original desired sample and provide an explanation and description of the final sample. Secondly, I provide a detailed description of the study participants. The research questions addressed in this study and answered by these data are provided below for the reader’s convenience.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to: 1) describe school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal and 2) identify ways in which these perceptions influence the methods and strategies used by individual schools and their district to prevent, identify, and manage youth identified as experiencing school refusal. Specific research questions that guided this inquiry included:

1. How have school personnel constructed their perceptions of school refusal?
1a). How do school personnel think about school refusal?

1b). What influences their understanding of school refusal?

2. What are school personnel’s reported perceptions, explanations, and beliefs related to school refusal?

   2a). How do school personnel describe school refusal?

   2b). What are the different forms of school refusal identified by school personnel?

3. How do school personnel perceive students they identify as experiencing school refusal?

   3a). How do school personnel describe students identified as experiencing school refusal?

4. What are the consequences of their perceptions for the recognition of school refusal among students?

   4a). What is the process by which school personnel identify students refusing school?

   4b). How do school personnel evaluate their experiences with students with school refusal?

The results are presented in three sections that address the purposes of the study flowing from the general to the more specific results, reflecting the manner in which data emerged within interviews. Throughout these results, I have categorized the types of school refusal using the stories constructed by the participants. I have attempted to capture the practical experiences of the participants in their every day settings. This included analyzing data that drew on agreements and re-occurring themes, and highlighting disagreements, conflicting views, and dissenting voices.
The first section, Establishing an Understanding of Personnel’s “Attendance Issues” Frame of Reference, lays the groundwork for the results of the study. This section is essential as it provides the participants’ reported conceptual frame of reference in which their perceptions are grounded. To allow readers to understand personnel perceptions of their own role, the first sub-section is devoted to how they define their roles in relation to attendance issues in general. The second sub-section describes participants’ perceptions of attendance issues overall. This section presents the language of the participants as it relates to attendance in general and specifically to school refusal. Quotation marks are used to distinguish the language of the participants. Also included is a focus on their perceptions of why students do not attend school, the perceived barriers to school attendance, and examples of why it is difficult to stay in school on a daily basis. The intention is to ground the remaining results within this umbrella of attendance issues. This section addresses the first purpose of the study, and directly answers the first research question.

The second section of results, Exploring School Personnel’s Reported Perceptions of School Refusal, is devoted to school personnel’s first hand accounts and perceptions of school refusal and the students who exhibit this behavior. The first sub-section provides participant’s perceptions of the actual behavior of refusing school and reviews their perceptions of the students who refuse school. This section also explores how school personnel construct their experiences, along with my interpretation of the images they offered of students they encountered. I end this section with a sub-section devoted to understanding the perceptions that influence personnel’s lived realities that ultimately influence their practical actions of identifying and intervening in cases of school refusal.
This section addresses the first purpose of the study and directly answers the second and third research questions.

The third section of results, Identification and Intervention in the Practical World, briefly describes the current identification and intervention processes for cases of school refusal before providing findings that highlight critical deviations from the reported policies on attendance. A sub-section highlights participants’ recommendations and ideas about identification and intervention. This section directly addresses the second purpose of the study, and answers the fourth research question.

The results of the Survey of School Refusal are presented in a separate section following the results of the interview data. These descriptive data provide the context for the identification and intervention efforts that occur within schools district-wide. Lastly, a brief summary that recapitulates the findings is provided.

Final Sample

The sampling strategies for this study had multiple levels based on each data collection method. Sampling strategies included stratification, purposefulness, snowball, population sample, and saturation. The estimated total sample size included a total of 100 interviews across ten schools and the district level, and an estimated 62 survey participants. Interviews were conducted with 92 participants overall and the final survey sample totaled 38.

*District Level Elite In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews*

The elite in-depth interviews were conducted at the district level. Specific departments under the district’s Division of Student Support Services and Federal Programs were selected using purposeful sampling. Within the Department of Student
Support Services, the departments for guidance, social work, psychology, and school health were selected for inclusion in the elite interviews. Due to the small number of personnel working in these departments, a population sample was attempted. The maximum sample size possible was twenty-one, based on the number of professional district-level employees at the division level in the selected departments. Several issues arose in the recruitment process that limited the population sample. For example, one department would not allow access to certain personnel, indicating they were “too busy,” while another department indicated they would allow only one person to participate in the interview process. The final sample for district level interviews included ten participants representing all departments. Given the level of confidentiality that was assured to participants and the small resultant sample size within each department, the final sample cannot provide a detailed stratification.

**School Level In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted at the school level. Purposeful, stratified random sampling without replacement was used to select schools for participation in the study (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999). Three levels of stratification were used in sampling: grade level, geographic location, and category of school personnel. This resulted in a minimum sample of ten schools. None of the schools selected shared itinerate personnel (e.g., a school psychologist); therefore no additional schools were selected. This ensured discrete samples of selected staff. The criterion for saturation during data collection was met within the ten schools; therefore there was no need to select additional schools for further data collection (*see discussion below for description of saturation*). However, when principals were contacted to obtain permission, two principals, one each from a
middle and a high school, declined to allow their school to participate, so two additional schools were randomly selected. With the addition of these two schools, again no schools shared itinerate personnel.

Once the ten schools were randomly selected, a stratified, purposeful sample of school personnel within each school setting was employed. The number of participants per cell was determined by saturation or redundancy. For the purposes of this study, saturation was particularly important for the school level interviews. However, this was limited for several reasons. Some departments within the schools would only allow one person to be interviewed (i.e., guidance, health services). Several personnel either declined to participate, typically indicating they were too busy, did not know anything about it, or were “the wrong person to talk to.”

The purpose of this study was to understand school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal, therefore, even if a participant indicated that they did not know anything about students who refused to attend school, they were informed that their opinion and experiences were very important. If they declined after being told that their input was valuable, the researcher did not pursue further, as some personnel seemed intimidated by the aspect of being interviewed for research purposes. Personnel who declined to participate were most often school office secretaries, school resource officers, and health assistants.

Teachers were selected using a snowball sample through referrals obtained during interviews with other school personnel. Principals, who the researcher met with prior to collecting data in each school, would immediately recommend a teacher to be interviewed, typically the teacher of the year. Given this and the potential for bias,
referrals were sought from non-instructional personnel that were interviewed as well as
from teachers interviewed. An additional category of personnel was indicated by the
principals and assistant principals at schools as others that should be interviewed as well.
This included the school attendance clerks and the student intervention specialists. After
conducting a few interviews with personnel in these categories it was determined that this
went beyond the scope of the study and therefore no further interviews were added. This
category of personnel is represented as “Other Personnel” in the final sampling matrix.

Table 3. Final Sampling Matrix for School Level Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level One Stratification: Geographic Location</th>
<th>District 1</th>
<th>District 2</th>
<th>District 3</th>
<th>District 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level Two Stratification: School Grade Level</th>
<th>Middle Schools (N=5)</th>
<th>High Schools (N=5)</th>
<th>Total (N=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Personnel within Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologists</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Workers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Services Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Office Staff</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Personnel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations

The random selection of the ten schools for in-depth interviews automatically
determined the selection of schools for observation. Observation took place in all schools.
selected for interviews (see section on School Level In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews).

*Descriptive Self-Administered Survey*

The sampling strategy for the administration of the descriptive survey was simple. A population sample of middle and high school principals was used. School principals represent the personnel most likely to have access to the information requested within the survey. The survey was sent to 68 principals. The final response rate was 61% (N=38).

*Description of Study Participants*

This section provides a thorough description of district and school level personnel participating in the survey and individual interviews. Given the nature of this study, detailed descriptive information enhances the quality of this study by strengthening the credibility and transferability of the findings. Although more thorough field notes were recorded throughout the duration of actual data collection, I uphold the responsibility to protect the anonymity of my respondents. Therefore, in some cases, descriptive data is limited to do so. Additionally, pseudonyms are used when describing personnel and in quotes. Pseudonyms do not reflect the true gender of the participant, however their actual position and school level is reported for descriptive purposes as well as to allow comparisons within the results.

*Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants*

*District Level Participants*

District level information related to gender is not provided to protect the anonymity of those participants. Given that this particular group had few participants, providing such information might make them identifiable. District level participants had a
combined total of 68 years of experience or an average of 9 years in their current county level positions. All participants had previous experience as school level personnel as well. All district level personnel reported graduate level college degrees at or beyond the master’s level.

School Level

Schools selected were located in urban, suburban, and rural locations. Student and school level demographics varied across ethnic make-up, economic status, and achievement. This was determined through a review of school level data from the State Department of Education School Indicators Database. These data were useful in providing contextual information about each school. However, specific indicators are not presented as it could make schools identifiable. This also was an issue in reporting specific descriptive data related to the observations conducted. Observations informed data analysis; however, these data are only incorporated into findings when applicable to protect individual schools from being identified.

Individual participants within schools. School personnel were mainly female, constituting 70% of all participants. This was paralleled when reviewing the breakdown of the gender of participants by school level. Participants from middle schools were 61% female and in high schools 75%. Overall, school personnel had a combined total of 712 years of experience, with a range of one to 31 years, in their current positions. Years of experience were roughly equal between middle and high school participants.

Occupations of those interviewed at the school level are shown in Table 3. Seven of these participants further identified themselves as department chairs within their school setting. Teacher participants represented the following areas of curriculum
instruction: biology, critical thinking, English, history, mathematics, science, and technology.

Slightly more than one-half of all participants had post baccalaureate experiences. All assistant principals, guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers reported having graduate degrees, as did nine of the teachers.

A little less than one-half of all participants reported being exposed to information related to attendance issues in general. Most indicated they had heard such information through in-service workshops, district meetings, staff development, faculty meetings, and master’s level courses.

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

Participants included middle and high school principals and other personnel, as some principals delegated the task of completing the survey to other personnel within the school. The majority of schools responding described themselves as being located in either a suburban or an urban setting (see Table 5 in the section titled Results of the Survey of School Refusal).

Section I: Establishing an Understanding of Personnel’s “Attendance Issues” Frame of Reference

“Attendance issues” were described as an umbrella of various reasons for school refusal; therefore, I present this section first to provide a reference point. This section is important as it provides the general contextual framework of attendance issues personnel use in constructing their perceptions of school refusal. This section provides the framework for the results by first describing how personnel define their roles in relation to attendance issues in general and describing participants’ perceptions of absenteeism in
general. Within the description of participants’ reported perceptions of absenteeism I review the attendance language of personnel, their perceptions of why students do not attend school, the perceived roles of the school and the family, perceived barriers to school attendance, and examples of why it is difficult to stay in school on a daily basis. This section addresses the first purpose of the study and directly answers the first research question.

School Personnel and their Roles

The various roles associated with the categories of school personnel in this study divide into three main areas; administration and discipline, student support, and curriculum instruction. Personnel in the administrative disciplinarian category include assistant principals, office personnel including attendance clerks, and school resource officers. Student support includes guidance counselors, health services staff, psychologists, and social workers. Curriculum instruction consists solely of teachers.

Categories of School Personnel

Overall, the categories of school personnel are not solely responsible for these areas, and often times are responsible for many more areas than what their specific title might imply. This section provides an overview of how school personnel describe their role in general and in relation to students who are refusing school. Roles are described in three sections: administration and discipline, student support, and curriculum instruction.

In Chapter 3, a standard description of school personnel’s roles was provided, however this section allows a glimpse into the study participants’ self-description.

The administration and discipline area deals with issues of accountability, assurance, and enforcement of educational rules, regulations, and statutes of the school,
the county, and the state. They are involved with any required reporting of specific educational and school based information. Likewise, any type of discipline issues that arise among students are routed through this general area, and mainly to what is referred to as the “Office of Student Affairs.” Assistant principals monitor student attendance rates to be aware of any students who are “chronically” absent and over the age of 16, so they may start the process of withdrawal. They are also responsible for student discipline.

Office staff and attendance clerks serve as the regulators of signing in and out of school and bookkeepers of attendance, respectively. School resource officers and deputies serve as security and protection of students and faculty, but also serve to enforce law within the school setting. They also work on developing positive relationships with students and serving as a role model.

Student support generally entails ensuring that the school is safe and comfortable for students. They also work to prevent and intervene when issues that affect these aspects of school arise. They describe themselves as student advocates, parent school liaisons, and the designated safe places in the school where a student can go if they just need to “get away.” Student support services included guidance counselors, health services personnel, psychologists, and social workers.

Guidance counselors cover a variety of areas, but specifically they are responsible for talking to students about attendance, bullying, problems at home, and resolving chronic attendance issues. Health services personnel work to evaluate health with the goal of keeping students in school if it is something that can be resolved in the school setting. Psychologists mainly conduct testing, work with students on behavioral issues, and provide counseling if students are having problems at home or school. Social workers
are the only school personnel who are overtly responsible for attendance evaluations. Their role is to work with the school to help identify students having difficulty attending, staying in school, or exhibiting emotional or behavioral problems. They work with parents and schools to develop plans to get the student to school, but are also charged with enforcing the state statutes of compulsory education. Therefore, at some point social workers are responsible for moving chronic absenteeism cases into the judicial system.

Curriculum instruction encompasses the classroom teachers, whose main purpose and goal is to educate the students, although many see their role as more expansive in terms of making a positive connection with students beyond just transmitting knowledge. Often a teacher refers a student to guidance, student affairs, or the social worker, if they notice a pattern of absences or attendance problems.

Perceptions of Absenteeism

As stated in previous chapters, this study used the definition of school refusal that focuses on the behavior, refusal to attend school. This section begins with a look at the terminology of attendance issues and definitions related to school refusal. This is presented first to ground the results of this study in the language of the participants, as well as to orient the reader to the participants’ own definitions for what exists versus what is in the professional literature. These findings document the idiosyncrasies of these terms, but most importantly provide the lens school personnel use when thinking and talking about attendance issues. After this, I go on to address personnel’s reported reasons for absenteeism.
Constructing Meaning for Terminology

A few important considerations should be mentioned. Participants rarely had a set of terms for describing school refusal. They typically referred to attendance issues, truancy, and absenteeism. Therefore, throughout the results, I use school refusal to describe the general behavior, as stated earlier, of students refusing to attend school. When participants described a specific type of school refusal, it is specifically noted.

To develop an understanding of how the terms used among professionals have translated into the applied and practical world of the school personnel, I intentionally asked about these terms at the end of each interview. This was a methodological decision, as participants do not really think about these terms, so to do this at the beginning of the interview may have contaminated the data. The terms asked about included absenteeism, school avoidance, school phobia, school refusal, and separation anxiety.

The majority of participants did not describe students using the terminology common within professional groups and indicated that such terms are used infrequently within the school setting. The few who did use terminology were either social workers or school psychologists, and some would specify hearing or using these terms mainly during their professional education. School psychologists were the most specific in their definitions of and delineations between terms. Two categories of school personnel, office personnel and school resource officers, were completely unfamiliar with the majority of terms.

Despite rarely using specific terminology within the interviews, when probed about the familiarity and meanings for the terms, most school personnel were more than willing to provide definitions. This was particularly the case for district level personnel,
who often provided definitions that mapped onto the definitions provided within the professional literature.

Definitions for the terms centered on the motivating factor for why the student was having an attendance issue (i.e., fear, defiance, safety, bullying). Personnel also would differentiate between the terms, although such delineations were subtle yet important. For example, a difference between school refusal and school avoidance was that while both meant that the student did not like school, school avoidance indicated the student would do anything to avoid it completely. Another type of delineation made was that some terms described phenomena more common among different grade levels. One example was the frequent description of separation anxiety as occurring more commonly in elementary school than in middle or high school.

Many of the definitions provided by participants came from examples, stories of students, conversations with parents, and personal knowledge. For some personnel, the process of reflecting on individual terms generated more stories or triggered a different type of story about a student who was refusing school. This happened most often when asked about the term school phobia. The following examples illustrate this process:

I:   Okay. The next one is school phobia. What about that term?

R:   I’ve heard a little bit about school phobia… but I don’t think I heard it here. I think I read an article or saw it on Oprah. Kids not wanting to go to school because they have a stomachache or something. I might have read it in a magazine. But I’ve not come across it…I take that back. I had a girl last year who didn’t want to come to school, because she said she didn’t have any friends and it finally worked out she went through counseling and she thought everybody here didn’t like her and stuff like that… (Mr. Frye, middle school teacher).

I:   I was going to ask you, you smiled when I said school phobia…
R: It immediately brought a student…it was my first year in school. He sat right beside the door. He would walk in the door and physically get ill, convulse, shake, and have to leave. I didn’t know what was going on. They told me he had school phobia. He was afraid, literally scared to death, of coming to school (Ms. Cameron, middle school teacher).

In some cases, the participant would actually apply terms retrospectively to categorize the stories of students they discussed earlier within their interview, but had not used the specific term at that point in time. In the following example, the participant had not mentioned school phobia throughout the interview, but when asked about the term at the end of the interview, responded with an example of a student:

Yeah. The school phobia. At the middle school level there was a girl where she just really became anxious in class. So we would just keep her in guidance for a while and have her help out in guidance. Well just sit there at first just to get her … have her in the building and then have her help out in guidance for a while and then eventually she started talking with some of the staff and then eased her back into her classroom (Mr. Sloane, high school social worker).

Absenteeism. School personnel’s definitions of absenteeism give insight into their basic conceptualization of attendance issues. This provides a point of reference for what they consider problematic or non-problematic when it comes to general school attendance. All school personnel were familiar with absenteeism. The common denominator for all definitions was that a student is missing days of school. Some participants added that absenteeism is an actual “condition” of a student not being where they are supposed to be, whether that is in school or in a particular class.

One dynamic of absenteeism that emerged was that it is not merely something that defines a one or two day absence, but a chronic, regular pattern that emerges over
time. Specific examples of such a pattern included five or more absences over a nine-week period, or two to three days in a given week.

Additionally, absenteeism carried a negative connotation with it, despite it being the only term that did not imply a motive. Participants referred to absenteeism as a “problem” with attendance.

It means that I think they’re chronically absent. It seems like a problem to me. It will be a diagnosis. Their problem is absenteeism (Mr. Frye, middle school teacher).

Usually it’s negative. You’re usually not talking about it unless it’s an issue. That’s it (Ms. Stein, district level).

Absenteeism to me personally means that you’re losing out in school and missing instruction and missing something that you might need (Mr. Sloane, high school social worker).

We have to look at it as a whole…rather than one individual school and one individual child. It’s much more a global issue for me and looking at the global issue of absenteeism…I think of it in terms of okay how can all of us attack the problem and what can all of us do to make a difference in the absenteeism of the students (Mr. Bueller, district level).

*School refusal.* Various categories of school personnel had never heard of and were not familiar with the term school refusal, including assistant principals, guidance counselors, health services staff, teachers, office staff, and a few social workers. Participants most familiar with school refusal were district level personnel, school psychologists, and social workers.

Those participants familiar with the term indicated that it was not commonly used within the school setting. The most common definition for school refusal was simply refusing to come to school, although most participants offered specific dynamics. At the district level, participants emphasized choice as a key element of school refusal.
School refusal is more of a conscious act by the student based upon a behavioral choice as opposed to an emotionality issue (Ms. Lim, district level).

Other participants echoed this sentiment of school refusal as motivated by behavioral choice rather than emotional factors, further clarifying that it encompassed willfulness and defiance. A few participants provided a delineation of school refusal from school phobia. One middle school social worker, Mr. Hughes, indicated school refusal either was a product of school phobia, or resulted from academic reasons or social reasons indicating that the latter is more chronic. Another participant, Mr. Ferris, a middle school psychologist, conceptualized school refusal as existing on a “spectrum” of behavior, which he described as follows:

School refusal, yeah. That would be the definition’s included in the term, but it would be refusing to come to school, and then I think of two things. I think of either the student who’s, you know, very young, afraid to come to school, you know, hasn’t, you know, it’s a new thing, a new scary thing to do. And, again, along with that would be the kid that gets bullied or intimidated and is refusing to come to school. And I think on the other end of the spectrum, the kids that maybe are academically frustrated or just some prefer home over school and they’re not gonna come to school no matter what you say or do.

A few participants offered an alternative definition of school refusal that had no connection to student behavior. They defined school refusal as the right of the school to refuse to accept a student back into the school who has been chronically truant.

School phobia. School phobia was a term familiar to most school personnel, although many confirmed that it is not a term that is actively used within the school setting. School resource officers, office personnel, and approximately half of teachers had never heard of school phobia. The common definition of school phobia offered included fear or being afraid of school, attending or coming to school, or being in school. School
personnel described this fear as intense, often resulting in physical rejection of actually going to school. Some personnel described students as being “unable to physically function.” School personnel reported that school phobia occurs in response to some type of incident or a particular event within the school setting and a few offered specific examples such as bullying, a traumatic event, a teacher, a particular class, or a location within the school.

School phobia is familiar to me, and to me that means that we have a child who has been traumatized somewhere, somehow, and connects it with school (Mr. Bueller, district level).

I’ve heard of it and that for some reason the student has a fear of attending the school. Something is generally happening there: being ridiculed by peers, particular teacher the student doesn’t like, or actually…somebody has done something to turn the student away from school. It could be when the child was younger, the student was discouraged, constantly told they were a failure where they developed a phobia against school. Generally, it’s related to some type of traumatic event in the child’s life as it relates to the school (Mr. Rooney, high school guidance counselor).

The concept of school phobia as an irrational or unrealistic fear of school was infrequent, and such fears were attributed to emotional disturbances, mental conditions, anxiety, and depression. Some specific examples of irrational fear included fear of crowds, hallways, social environments, and a discomfort associated with school. A few personnel extrapolated school phobia out to a broader issue, describing it as a social or specific phobia. It was pointed out that if a student “receives a medical diagnosis of school phobia” they can be enrolled in a hospital homebound program.

It means there is condition beyond the child’s control that means they…they’re afraid of school and it’s not based on things that you can…that would make sense, or that are real maybe. It’s more of a mental condition, a state of mind (Ms. Peterson, middle school guidance counselor).
The idea of school phobia as not real was rare; however, a few personnel shared this perception. Delineating between “true school phobia” and “school phobia,” they described those students who “just didn’t like school” as using this as an excuse to not attend, oftentimes using it to manipulate their parents. School phobia in these instances is not viewed as real.

Personally I think it’s a cop out…you know it’s a fix. It’s a quick fix, you know? Kid doesn’t want to come so let’s label it something. Our society has gotten real big into labeling. ADHD. ADD. So we make exceptions because they’re that way. I think it’s a cop out. I think maybe there might be I guess one or two cases that it could be, you know, true, but I just think it’s a label (Mr. Ed, middle school assistant principal).

Not very often, because I don’t think there are any…there aren’t too many real school phobics. I think they’re few and far between, although a lot of kids would like to use that term, just for convenience sake (Ms. Grace, high school guidance counselor).

School avoidance. School avoidance was a term familiar to slightly more than half of all school personnel. Among those familiar with the term, it was not something commonly heard in the school setting. The majority of teachers had not heard of it, with several offering up task avoidance as what they thought of when they heard the term school avoidance. They defined task avoidance as when a student does anything possible to avoid the task assigned within the classroom. The general definition for school avoidance was avoidance of school for many different reasons.

It was pointed out by several participants that this could also apply to students avoiding a specific class, and not just school as a whole. Some participants compared and contrasted this term with others, such as school refusal. One participant described school avoidance as passive-aggressive and internal, whereas school refusal is blatant and
external. Several participants saw school avoidance and school phobia as different ways to refer to the same behavior. A few indicated that this was yet another reason for truancy. There was no indication of whether this was viewed as a positive or negative term.

**Separation anxiety.** Separation anxiety was a term familiar to most participants, but not as a term used within the school setting. Participants defined it in several ways including the anxiety a child experiences when being separated from their parents, their mother, their primary caregiver, or their home. Several participants did not associate separation anxiety with attendance issues. Two participants, both school psychologists, did link separation anxiety to school phobia, as seen in the following examples.

I: And then separation anxiety. Is that term familiar?

Yeah. Separation anxiety I think is kind of linked up with school phobia. You know when you say separation anxiety; the first thing I would think of would be school phobia. If you say school phobia, the first thing I would think of is separation anxiety. I mean those are kind of hand in hand (Mr. Baker, middle school psychologist).

Uh-huh [affirmative]. I don’t hear that used unless it’s used, you know, among guidance counselors or school psychologists or social workers. The fear of leaving the significant person in the child’s life. You know, whether it’s the mother or the father or something you know. The fear of what’s gonna happen while that child’s away from that significant other. And I know it’s very hard to differentiate in the literature, because I’ve wanted at one point to do…as an undergrad I think I did something or tried to do something on school phobia, cause I’ve always been interested in that and it is such a conglomeration of…school refusal, school avoidance, separation anxiety, social anxiety, you know? It’s…it’s a…cause it’s really hard to know what’s going on. And then a lot of times I’ve seen kids who once they’ve been out of school so long, maybe it started as a school refusal but then it can slide into the school phobia and then at the same time be an anxiety issue… (Ms. Ryan, high school psychologist).
Others related separation anxiety to their experiences with their own children when they started school. Most participants described separation anxiety as occurring among younger children, such as kindergarteners, indicating that it is not common in the middle or high school setting.

*Applied use of terminology within the school setting.* The practical use of these terms related to attendance issues is not common among school personnel. While most personnel indicated that they would apply specific terms, this was often in a retrospective manner that occurred in real time during an interview. For example, when asked if they would apply any of the terms, many school personnel would refer back to a particular student they discussed and then proceed to think aloud as they applied the various terms they saw most fitting the student’s story.

Absenteism was the most common term that personnel indicated as being applied within the school setting. Some school personnel would list the terms they thought they might use in a school setting and provide reasons for why some terms would be applied to some students versus others. This revealed a few of the attributes they use to differentiate students with attendance issues, such as young children typically having separation anxiety, or school avoidance including students who are “skippers” and have bad grades.

*Reported Reasons for Absenteeism*

General perceptions of school refusal among school personnel reflected conceptualizations of problematic versus non-problematic absenteeism. Most participants cited that there are multiple reasons, factors, and variables to explain why students do not come to school. Many participants explained further that there are no blanket
explanations for why some students do not come to school, although overall they offered broad themes as the main or most important reasons. Reasons included students’ not liking school, finding school boring or not challenging enough, experiencing academic failure, outside activities, working too much, peer pressure, laziness, skipping, illness, low motivation, oversleeping, and truancy. Although participants offered these as some of the reasons, these were not emphasized as the main or most important issues affecting school attendance. These perceptions transcended all categories of school personnel.

Very few participants delineated absences into excused versus unexcused. Excused refers to parents providing a written note or telephone call “excusing” the student, while unexcused indicates no parental note, acknowledgement, or permission was provided to the school to “excuse” the student from their absence. Participants believed absences, regardless of excused or unexcused, were avoidable in most cases, and therefore not acceptable.

The majority of participants zoned in on problematic absenteeism, often delineating reasons considered legitimate and thus garnering more empathy as opposed to those that are not. For example, victims of bullying, teasing, or uncomfortable social situations were described more sympathetically. It was implied that it is understandable why such students refuse to come to school. The following sections highlight the key reasons participants’ delineated absenteeism in this manner. These key reasons include absenteeism related to school transitions, illness, and grade level.

Participants empathized with students who are going through transitional periods such as moving from elementary to middle, “the middle school struggle,” or middle to high school. This is considered “a tenuous period” for many students. They would often
link similar personal experiences of their own discomfort in school to demonstrate their awareness of such awkward school transitions. A sub-category that is related to the concept of transitions is the general idea that if during a transition the student does not make a social or academic connection with the school, it will cause or exacerbate absenteeism. Participants believed being connected to school in some manner was an important part of positive experiences and attendance habits. Grade level emerged as a qualifier between the types of transition a student might experience. Personnel believed that in elementary school the transition was often focused on the student leaving home for the first time and resulting in either “school phobia” or “separation anxiety.” At the middle or high school level, it was related more to the social aspects of “fitting in” or finding their social niche.

Illness was another way in which school personnel separated reasons into legitimate and non-legitimate. Chronic illness was acceptable, when clearly documented by a physician. One participant discussed the process of “doctor shopping,” which is when parents visit many doctors until they receive a medical diagnosis (typically for mental health) for the child that makes them eligible for district provided hospital homebound education. Personnel viewed this negatively. Illness that was not considered legitimate meant that the student faked illness, was ill, but could have attended school, was experiencing perceived illness caused by anxiety or fear, or had a parent who was overprotective or “doctor shopping.”

1 Hospital homebound education occurs when the school district dispatches teachers to the student who has a documented medical reason for their inability to attend school. There is a review process that occurs prior to approving a student for hospital homebound education.
Several participants also brought up grade level in general as a defining factor of whom the blame of poor attendance might fall on. For elementary school students, participants pointed to parents as being responsible for ensuring their child attends regularly, whereas once in middle and high school that responsibility shifts to the child. Participants indicated that often, the failure of parents to enforce positive attendance behavior in the early years would set the wheels in motion for future attendance issues.

The Role of the School

Although not considered a main reason, a certain level of responsibility for students’ refusing school was placed on the school itself. Three major themes emerged including the school’s role in promoting connectedness, the social milieu of the school, and the academically focused climate. As one participant explained, “In the district we lose almost 7,000 9th graders a year from quitting school because we’re not tying them in and they’re not feeling connected” (Mr. Andie, high school assistant principal).

Others alluded to systemic issues within the school district, such as bussing and school choice. Some kids are bussed past several schools close to them to reach a school where they feel “out of their environment.” One participant indicated that due to the middle to upper class majority in their school, “if the student does not have the right clothes or personality it is really hard for that student to feel like a part of this school” (Ms. Walsh, high school social worker). Several participants indicated that the current environment of academic achievement caters to “elite students” and leaves students who are not academically advanced more likely to lose interest because they believe they cannot compete.
Academic failure was another main theme that participants described as a major reason for why students do not come to school. Participants believed that students who continually encounter academic failure would eventually give up on school. They lose interest and connectedness. They experience embarrassment and rather than continue to deal with it, they would much rather avoid it. A few participants cited standardized benchmark testing as a reason for some students to avoid school. If the student has failed, they feel like there is no way out and give up. Several participants described some students as experiencing boredom due to a failure of the school to provide appropriate challenges, and thus lose interest as a result.

The Role of Family

Family was a recurrent theme within different contexts of the data, therefore throughout the results family and parents will re-appear in various sections. Given that context from which these findings emerged are distinct instead of grouping results related to parents together, these findings are reported within the thematic context from which they emerged. The overwhelming majority of participants indicated that the family plays a major role in attendance issues, with many declaring it the number one reason. Several themes emerged as sub-categories of the role the family plays and it was often discussed in terms of parents rather than the family unit as a whole. These themes included home life, parental educational experience, and parenting skills.

Participants indicated that home and personal issues make attending school difficult for some students. Home issues included issues such as physical and/or emotional abuse, divorce, and alcohol abuse. Socio-economic status of the family was also mentioned. Participants often cited this in conjunction with reasons for absenteeism
such as the parents keeping the child home to care for younger siblings or to work to help support the family. A few participants indicated that some parents would just keep their child home to keep them company.

Participants indicated the parents’ own educational experiences as a major issue for why some students do not attend school. The premise is that the parent transfers their perceptions and opinions (often negative) to their child.

We have some parents who never were really successful in school, find school to be a threatening place, and kind of perpetuate that with their kids (Mr. Blane, middle school assistant principal).

An overwhelming majority of school personnel indicated that parents do not value education. Some provided explanations for why. A few participants expressed that some of the parents’ cultures do not value education, or value other things more, such as working and money. Others indicated that there is often a generational cycle of poor attendance and dropping out. Several participants suggested many families lack the structure to support and value education. This includes a failure of parents to motivate and encourage their children to go to school.

Many participants indicated that attendance problems stem from poor parenting skills, including lack of parent supervision, permissive parenting, and loss of parental control. Many parents leave the house before their child has to be at school and expect the child to get up on their own and go. Some parents were described as setting up a historical pattern of non-attendance by letting it slide in elementary school, but then when they want them to attend in middle or high school, the student refuses because the non-attendance behavior has been established. This also illustrates the perception of the loss of control the parent experiences that causes them to give up.
A few participants gave students the benefit of the doubt, indicating that regardless of the reason, students truly do not understand the impact of not attending school.

They don’t know the ramifications of not coming to school. They think they know…but I don’t think they understand how that daily decision that they make is going to impact them further down the line (Ms. McDonnagh, high school assistant principal).

This quote also reveals, as was reiterated by many personnel, that in high school, the decision to come to school really is the responsibility of the student, although there should be more expectations and involvement from the parents.

*Perceived Barriers to Attending School*

Many participants indicated that the issues that make attending school difficult are similar to many of the reasons they mentioned in general as to why kids do not come to school. These reasons included lack of parental support, low educational motivation, academic failure, and boredom. However, the majority of participants added or emphasized something specific that makes it actually *difficult* to come to school. Approximately half of participants discussed the reasons in terms of barriers, which consisted of physical, mental, emotional, social, and societal barriers that make coming to school difficult. These barriers were described as internal and external to the student and their locus of control.

Physical barriers included illness and transportation, although transportation was more often mentioned as something that should *not* make attending school difficult given the busing system in place. However, timing of the school day, especially in middle schools, was indicated as a reason that some students have a difficult time getting to
school. Some middle schools begin at 9:00 a.m. after many parents have already left the home for work, leaving students to get themselves ready and off to the school bus on their own. Many personnel indicated that this is too much responsibility for some students. If the student misses the bus they often do not come to school, as either, the parent is already gone, or the family does not have the resources to get them there.

Illness was again separated into legitimate and non-legitimate reasons that make attending school difficult. Legitimate reasons included documented chronic conditions such as asthma, allergies, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and severe menstrual cramps. However, many of these same conditions (asthma, ADD, and menstrual cramps) were also considered non-legitimate reasons. Additionally, vague illnesses such as stomachaches, headaches, colds, and “claims” of general malaise were often described as reasons students used for not attending school. Despite the veracity of the illness, personnel still considered these reasons that make attending school difficult.

Well, physical issues. I’m one of the teachers that really believe that there is such a thing as ADD and ADHD and I think there are a lot of kids out there that have similar characteristics and it’s just difficult for them to work in the classroom and stay focused and they’d rather be busy doing something else (Mr. Wallace, high school teacher).

Many participants described mental and emotional barriers that included issues of embarrassment, school phobia, anxiety, depression, ADD, learning disabilities, and feelings of hopelessness. Embarrassment was commonly described as resulting from not having “the right clothes,” or not having the social skills to fit in with a social group. A few participants cited school phobia as a cause of anxiety in attending school. Some participants point to clinical mental health issues as a source of difficulty. Hopelessness
was depicted as resulting from repeated cycles of academic frustration and failure stemming from the student’s belief that it is too late and they are too far behind to catch up.

Social barriers, one of the most prominent themes that emerged among school personnel, centered mainly on students’ feelings of social discomfort in the school setting. Many participants suggested that students have a difficult time coming to school if they are not comfortable in their surroundings. There were several dynamics to the perception of what causes student discomfort within the school setting, including peer relations, school climate, and student-teacher relationships, as well as some of the issues mentioned above such as physical, mental and emotional barriers.

Peer relations included issues related to bullying, social groups or cliques, and peer pressure. Bullying was mentioned frequently as a reason that caused some students to have trouble coming to school, especially in middle school. Participants indicated that bullying causes fear and concerns of safety. Another reason provided was that many students have a difficult time finding their social niche for various reasons, and if they cannot “fit in,” they feel uncomfortable coming to school. Peer pressure related more to the pressure for students to engage in deviant behaviors like skipping school. Often, personnel commented on peers outside of the school setting, such as older siblings, boyfriends, and girlfriends who distract the student and serve as an external force.

At the middle school level, it is all peers. Middle school is predominantly socialization. It’s all about…there’s such a huge change in a person from 6th grade to 8th grade, physically, mentally, and emotionally. They’re conflicted…with physical change and appearance, peer pressure. It makes it hard for ‘em to come to school if they haven’t found their niche. And they don’t understand the niches to even find their niche, so they’ll find the conflict to be so great (Ms. Cameron, middle school teacher).
Peer relations are also a component of school climate, although comments about school climate were related to general safety concerns and a negative school tone. Another part of school climate was the issue of teacher and student relationships. Some personnel indicated that if a student “perceives” a teacher does not like him/her or they have some type of conflict, the student would more likely have difficulty attending. A few personnel raised the issue of the current testing and accountability climate in schools as a reason. They explained that it makes attending school difficult because of the pressure placed on students to perform, as well as for those students who fail such testing.

Societal barriers include overarching issues that were mentioned as general reasons that serve as barriers to attending school. These included poverty, socio-economic status, basic needs, violence, neglect, divorce, and drug addiction. A few personnel talked broadly about these issues, indicating they affect students at home and in society, making school attendance more difficult in light of larger life issues.

Sometimes they have to raise children. Sometimes they’re having to find a place to live. And sometimes they’re out there trying to make money to ease the pressure on…and it’s usually the grandmother that they’re living with and trying to help out financially if they possibly can (Ms. Gary, high school teacher).

*Perceptions of Remaining in School All Day*

When I asked school personnel to differentiate between students who have a difficult time coming to school from those who have a difficult time remaining in school for the entire day, they emphasized similar issues, such as emotional difficulties and mental health issues, but also spoke to “perceived” bullying and low connection to school. These two themes are represented by the following quotations.
Examples of “perceptions” of bullying.

I guess one of the things maybe could be conflict with a teacher. I think sometimes they look for an out, you know? In their perception that maybe they’re being picked on unfairly by the teacher and one of their ways to get out, to leave, you know, just say might be to go to the guidance counselor, you’re gonna go to the nurse, you know, talk to the nurse a few times. Those repeat offenders, I guess we would call them, you know, who always leave class because of the reasons you said. But it’s a perception that, you know, they don’t get along with their geography teacher or whoever, you know, teacher’s picking on ‘em unfairly. And so I guess that could be a reason why they might … it would be their perception of being picked on by the teacher, or conflict with a teacher, personality conflict (Mr. Baker, middle school psychologist).

We’ve had some cases of, you know, kids perceiving that people are picking on them, so … like we have a kid … I don’t actually have him, but he’s on my team. He felt that everyone in this particular class didn’t like him, so he would go home on a daily basis, because he didn’t want to be in that class (Mr. Henry, middle school teacher).

Example of low connectedness.

There’s no connection. There’s no connection at all. You know, the things that we’re doing, you know, just in the culture of the school itself, you know, if they don’t feel like they’ve got friends here, if they don’t feel like they can connect with anybody, if they don’t feel like anybody cares, and if they don’t feel like they get the help that they need, what’s the point in staying? You know, nobody’s gonna miss them in their own opinion (Ms. Donnelly, high school guidance counselor).

Issues that keep students from remaining in school the entire day centered again on those issues affecting the comfort level of the student. Exhaustion and poor nutrition were also included as reasons that make it hard for some students to stay in school all day. Some only thought of “skipping school” as the main reason and it was often resulting from peer pressure and outside influences.

This was also the first time many participants brought up students they refer to as “frequent fliers.” Although a term predominantly used by health services staff, other
personnel also discussed these students and their frequent visits to the school clinic.

Frequent fliers were described as students who come to school, but after the first few hours or even minutes of school, report vague symptoms of illness and request to go to the school clinic. These students visit the clinic on a regular basis, usually following a pattern, with the same symptoms.

R: Well we have a lot of frequent fliers in the clinic.

I: Tell me about frequent fliers.

R: They’re kids that come out of the 5 school days, 3 to 5 days a week, at least once a day. We always call the parent, especially with the frequent fliers because we want the parent to know how often their child is coming. And 99% of the time, there’s no reason. Every once in a while there will be a medical reason and you find it. We usually encourage a checkup or something if a child comes in, for instance, we have one that’s coming in with headaches very frequently (Mr. Wyatt, middle school nurse).

Another example of what personnel describe as a frequent flier:

Once they come to school, it seems like first period they’re fine. They see their friends. They go about and they see their friends and they’re okay. And like usually by third period we start getting hit with ‘em, they start coming in wanting to go home by third period. I’d say probably three-fourths of them could stay here that go home, but they don’t want to be here (Ms. Hilly, high school health assistant).

Frequent fliers emerged as a sub-theme within varying contexts of these results. It will be discussed in the next section in relation to the construction of school refusal as illness and as a symptom.

Section II: Exploring School Personnel’s Reported Perceptions of School Refusal

This next section represents a shift from the general to the specific. The first section provided the contextual framework of general attendance issues as perceived by
school personnel. This section delves into school personnel’s specific experiences with school refusal and how those experiences inform their interactions with students and parents. I begin by briefly deconstructing the specific terms personnel choose to use when describing school refusal as a behavior, followed by an examination of their reported understandings of the actual behavior. I then expand on how school personnel construct their perceptions of actual students who experience school refusal, further deconstructing their reported stories and the emergent themes, arriving at nine typifications of students. This section addresses the first purpose of the study and directly answers the second and third research questions.

**Descriptions of School Refusal as a Behavior**

This section provides a general overview of the descriptive dimensions school personnel use when thinking about, talking about, and describing school refusal. It emphasizes the behavior of school refusal itself as opposed to the student, although at times these became intertwined. Starting with a brief review of the descriptive terms and words used by personnel when describing the behavior of school refusal, this section goes on to expound upon emergent themes related to perceptions of differences by grade level, cause, and patterns related to school refusal.

**Descriptive Terms and Words**

The majority of school personnel indicated that they do not have a predefined or specific terminology that they use to describe students who are refusing school or the behavior of refusing school. Only a handful of participants used the term school refusal, and this was mostly among social workers or school psychologists. However, most participants went on to provide and use various terms while providing descriptions of
students and their behavior. The most common term was truant or truancy. Only one participant indicated that this term was old and no longer used. Some of the other terms used included school phobic, non-attender, skipper, problem, frequent flyer, and chronic absentee.

Some participants described the actual behavior using words like skipping, truancy, habitual non-attendance, excessive absenteeism, and separation anxiety. Others, although not the majority, offered some of the following adjectives: floaters, wanderers, lazy, withdrawn, unmotivated, uninterested, belligerent, underachieving, at-risk, angry, and troublemakers. A few participants used phrases to describe students, including, “the kids that got issues,” “the motivated good versus the motivated bad,” “kids with attendance problems,” and “the ‘I don’t care’ kids.”

One participant, Ms. Johnson, a high school assistant principal, indicated that, “It all gets lumped under the attendance issues umbrella.” Several participants simply described students as having, “an attendance issue,” or “an attendance problem.” A few participants indicated how they see others describe kids who refuse school.

Usually I hear them… they’re spoken of negatively. I hear a lot of times that they’re lazy. Some of these kids might be frustrated and they’re… it’s coming across as laziness (Mr. Ferris, middle school psychologist).

I’ve heard other kids call them losers (Mr. Bender, high school teacher).

A lot of times what happens is even those kids who are experiencing anxiety and frustration, they’re considered unmotivated. I think a lot of adults don’t recognize what’s hidden under the surface. They don’t… a lot of times I don’t think they see those kids who feel fearful, who are experiencing frustration (Ms. Standish, middle school psychologist).
A few participants indicated that they do not use any specific words because they try to avoid labels or labeling of any kind when it comes to students. Mr. Claire, a high school psychologist, was the only participant to express that he hears a lot of positive things used to describe students like, “This kid’s really got a lot of good things going on for him, he’s just struggling with this part of his life.”

**Described Differences in School Refusal by Grade Level**

When discussing differences based on grade levels, school personnel went back and forth between discussing specific issues causing absenteeism and addressing general absenteeism. School personnel frequently delineated differences in the reasons for school refusal and attendance issues according to the grade level of the students. Only a few personnel indicated that there were not any differences according to grade level.

I think it’s very different for elementary versus secondary students…I don’t think I could give you one. The thing about it is that it’s complex. It’s not…the reasons for it are not just universal and they vary from… by age levels, I think. And so if you can look at those issues, I think you’ve got to understand that it’s so multi-faceted, the reasons for, and the characteristics of everybody by age level. You know, a 6 year old boy isn’t the same as a 16 year old boy in terms of non-school attendance. The reasons for the things behind it are completely different (Mr. Vernon, district level).

Some described school phobia and separation anxiety as more common among younger students in elementary school, but also occurring in middle school. Only a few participants indicated that they had seen this occur among high school students.

Surprisingly, a few participants brought up the issue of Munchausen’s syndrome as a reason that some elementary school students do not come to school. Defiant school refusal was linked mainly to high school students. Only one person actually used the term
school refusal while explaining it as an issue more common among high school students than elementary or middle school.

Several participants indicated that in both middle and high school, absences due to one reason, for example illness, could spawn a vicious cycle of absences due to the stress students experience from falling behind. However, this was not discussed as an issue among younger students. One participant cited a study stating that attendance issues in kindergarten predicted at-risk status in high school. This particular participant found this disturbing, as she believed most people do not think it is a big deal to miss elementary school.

Participants described fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth graders as more likely to have problems attending due to transitional issues. This was described as fear, uncertainty, or general anxiety regarding going to a new school and trying to fit into a new social setting.

I see it being most concerning with the ninth graders that there’s something with that transition between middle school and high school and if we had the magic formula to fix it… (Mr. Andie, high school assistant principal).

Several participants discussed the main issues affecting the attendance patterns of secondary level students (middle and high school) as being unsuccessful (either academically or socially), dysfunctional family life, or emotional issues. Emotional issues such as depression, anxiety, and mental health disorders were discussed as issues also affecting secondary students as well.

Participants explained that attendance issues among elementary school students are the parent’s responsibility, and often are caused by the parents themselves. Some examples included parents who oversleep, are not home in the morning, or leave for work
early. Young students are typically not held accountable for their absence. However, many personnel, at the district, middle, and high school levels, consider middle and high school students responsible for their attendance.

This was reflected in how school personnel described the differences in school climate between elementary, middle, and high school. Elementary school is considered warm and nurturing, middle school is less nurturing and high school even more so. Several participants expressed that middle and high school are times when students are extremely vulnerable and could benefit from a nurturing environment, but instead become lost in the crowd of a larger setting, and become harder to engage.

*Describing School Refusal as “School Phobia”*

School phobia and general phobias of school were brought up by various participants, typically social workers, psychologists, health services staff, guidance counselors, and teachers. Participants described this type of school refusal as either a phobia in general or “school phobia.” It generally denoted any fear related to being in or coming to school. It was often described as an intense fear of school primarily affecting younger students in elementary school, but also students at transitional periods in the education.

We see more of the problem we’re talking about with school phobia with younger children. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist elsewhere… (Ms. Richard, district level).

And there’s that group of students who begin to develop phobias (Mr. Bueller, district level).

Some participants discussed school phobia as occurring among students who have never had problematic school attendance.
There are pretty few truly school phobic kids who really just emotionally can’t deal with it. And like I said, a lot of the time they’re kids who just never had a problem before but something… something happened, whether it’s a combination of factors or whether it’s just one thing that kind of sent them over the edge (Ms. Reynolds, middle school nurse).

Participants often described school phobia as resulting from real or perceived stimuli. School phobia was thought to result from perceived or actual bullying, a negative school climate, anxiety inducing transitions, an unexplained internal fear of school, or an actual fear caused by something else but displaced on school. Personnel’s idea of a student experiencing a real or perceived stimulus was typically described in connection with two issues: bullying and teacher attitudes towards students. The following examples below illustrate these perceptions.

I: How would you describe what students experience when they have this refusal to go, or this difficulty staying in the school?

R: Well it probably falls into, you know, a couple of categories: the phobic child who’s afraid. The child who’s being bullied is afraid, physically afraid.

I: Would you break those out?

R: Well while they’re two different issues, one I think they’re … it’s an internal fear that’s, you know, manifested and it’s expanded beyond any reality, that’s phobia. And yet where the child who’s being bullied, it’s really physically, or he’s afraid what verbally people are doing to him. I mean that’s the child that he’s really physically afraid to go so, you know, that’s just different categories. And I think that there’s a lot that they’re discovering about bullying and … I think it was, you know, some traditional actions of I’ll just ignore it and … (Ms. Stein, district level).

Some kids feel unsafe. They’re being bullied, and they don’t want to face their tormentors. They fear that, and this could be unfounded or founded, that a major violent event is going to occur at their school. They feel like their teachers have it in for them. The school climate, the overall school climate, could be negative…
We go back to the bullying and the fear and their perception of what is going on, even though the reality of the situation either with the teacher or with what they think is going to happen at school is not valid, but it is their reality and so therein we have to deal with that perception (Mr. Bueller, district level).

Participants often indicated that these students would come to school, however, shortly after arrival or upon the actual arrival to school, begin to display signs of anguish. It was not described as something that caused students to refuse to attend school completely, but instead single-minded thoughts that they absolutely do not want to be at school.

They become very anxious, you know? It’s almost like having a panic attack, because they’re confronted with the people, you know, the kids, the teachers, just the whole, you know, school setting is frightening to them. They cannot cope, you know. They just cannot cope in a normal way (Ms. Grace, high school guidance counselor).

Health services personnel described students with school phobia as often reporting to the school clinic within the first hour of the day either emotionally distraught or with physical symptoms.

You know, within 30 minutes or an hour they’re down to the clinic, you know, complaining of symptoms, completely hysterical because they just can’t deal with it (Ms. Reynolds, middle school nurse).

I think there’s one particular student who displays a lot of physical complaints, you know, stomach irritability… there’s always some kind of stomach problem. And I believe that this has a lot to do with school phobia… you know he’s fine at home, but to get up in the morning, that’s when the stomach problems and the pain and all these kinds of things… (Ms. Walsh, high school social worker).

A few described students as noticeable and well known by their actual refusal. One participant stated, “This is not the quiet child that you pick up indicators on.” Several personnel indicated that parents sometimes bring it to the school’s attention.
because they are the first to encounter difficulties bringing their child to school. They then turn to the school for help. Others described the students’ demeanor as quiet and introverted, and different from more defiant students who they consider truant.

I mean…a true…a school phobic I think doesn’t have the, you know, the attitude that oh, school is stupid and, you know, it’s not worth my time kind of thing. They’re more I think introverted and focused on themselves. They don’t seem as outgoing and as social, you know, usually as the kids who are in trouble or even don’t want to be here because their friends are elsewhere (Ms. Grace, high school guidance counselor).

Many participants who discussed school phobia emphasized that there are only a handful of true cases of school phobia. Some were more negative referring to school phobia using words like “supposedly,” “cop-out,” or “another label.” A few went further to include that it is something that must be officially diagnosed and that happens in very few cases. It was not clear whether this is due to low utilization of psychiatric care among students.

We have had some cases up here that were true school phobias, but I very rarely run across that. I’d say I get one, maybe one school phobia every two or three years, maybe (Mr. Burnham, middle school social worker).

We’ve seen one or two that are true school phobics, but those are few and far between (Mr. Hoeman, middle school assistant principal).

When participants used language to describe some cases of school phobia as real or true, I would often ask them to describe the differences between real and not real. Often, real cases were considered true psychological or mental health problems, whereas not real cases were considered students who were just not comfortable in school, or there was another problem underlying the supposed phobia. One participant described differentiating between the two as being difficult.
Parents role in school phobia. When describing examples of school phobia, participants frequently mentioned parents. Parents were reported as being very involved with these children, especially when trying to bring them to school. Often, parents were described as having a hard time leaving the child at school because the child was so upset. Personnel indicated that this made the situation worse and the child more emotional. Personnel commented that if they can get the parent to leave, the child typically calms down, although not in every case.

A few participants linked this type of response or behavior to separation anxiety expressing that sometimes the parent is more fearful than the child is. It was thought by some that parents enabled the child to continue the behavior.

I have never seen in my experience a case of school phobia that did not have a parent who was indulging them. Even though they say they aren’t, they really are (Mr. Burnham, middle school social worker).

Out of all the comments by personnel about the role of the parent, the mother was discussed most frequently. The mention of fathers was noticeably absent from their comments.

Many participants provided resources and suggestions to parents, often including the need to take the child to a therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Several participants reported that such students were already working with an outside party. A few were said to be on medications of some type.

Personnel reported that some students with school phobia end up on hospital homebound. This requires a doctor’s diagnosis of school phobia. Many personnel who discussed this believed this was the worst thing for the student, as they believed it
perpetuated the phobia. Some participants indicated that some parents pressure doctors for a diagnosis of school phobia so the child can be placed on homebound.

You know, with school phobia, the more you stay home and the more you isolate yourself, usually the worse it gets (Ms. Grace, high school guidance counselor).

The school responses advocated by the participants included the use of a team approach. The inclusion of teachers was considered most important. A few participants said that teachers often become frustrated with this issue. Many participants described placing such students on modified school schedules, in attempt to work them back into a full school day.

*School Refusal as Symptom*

Several school personnel described refusing school as a symptom of something else that has occurred in the student’s life. These perceptions were found mainly among student support personnel, such as social workers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and health services staff.

I just don’t see the attendance as the most important, the most pressing problem that he’s experiencing. I think that’s a symptom of some others issues (Ms. Donnelly, high school guidance counselor).

Usually for us the lack of school attendance for lack of a better phrase is a symptom of a much larger issue (Ms. Lim, district level).

It is a symptom of problems that need attention… This is a symptom that needs to be addressed somehow (Ms. Chad, middle school social worker).

Participants also described general physical symptoms that appear to be indicative of something larger. Typically, these symptoms are reported by students who are refusing to attend school, and include non-specific stomachaches, headaches, and nausea.
Many personnel reported that when trying to understand students who are refusing to attend school, they try to get at the real problem. They see attendance issues as an indicator of a larger issue. This was especially common among health services staff in their efforts to screen out real illness from other issues.

First of all, like I say, I try to find out what the real problem is and can it be solved, you know? So you can deal with it realistically (Ms. Denton, high school nurse).

This also appears to be related to the description of “frequent fliers.” Health services staff often described frequent fliers, or frequent visitors to the clinic, as students who were not truly ill. Their frequent visits to the clinic appear as symptoms of something else, typically a desire not to be in a particular class for some reason.

In one high school, where I conducted a daylong set of observations, I watched the same student appear in each office I observed multiple times. She appeared to fit the description of the “frequent flier.” Her complaint in each location was different. In the clinic, she did not feel well, called home, and cried. In student affairs, she tried to get to call home because she needed different shoes and just wanted to go home instead. In guidance, she walked in and out several times asking to speak to a guidance counselor. Later in the day, she came back to the clinic again. At one point the school nurse stepped outside into the student affairs office and said to me, “Here is a good case for you to study,” referring to the same student I saw all day long.

A major concern related to viewing school attendance as a symptom focused on the importance of looking beneath the surface for an underlying cause when a student does have an attendance problem. A few participants indicated that refusal to come to
school might appear like a behavioral problem that should be punished, but it may in fact be due to other factors. A few participants actually described refusing school as a cry for help.

What follows is an analogy of a tree with branches that was offered by Mr. Sweeney, a middle school social worker, who explained his understandings of how refusing school or what he refers to as truancy is a symptom (branch) of deep underlying problems (roots). He began his story while holding up his hand and forearm, with five outstretched fingers:

Think of this as a tree with the branches on it. These are all the problems I just said right here. Those are important. And when you want to cut down a tree, you don’t cut these. Where do you cut? You cut down here at the base, that dries all these up, and the tree goes away. All the problems go away. Now what we tend to do, we’re not… I’m not saying we tend to do this. You don’t want to be cutting this. Each one of these fingers is a problem. Here’s truancy right here. This kid has a truancy problem. I say no he does not have a truancy problem. He has another problem coming up here, whether there’s instability in the family, whether there’s violence in the family, whether education is not valued, go to the trunk, and cut it down. Do not go up here, because what you’ll do, you’ll knock yourself out trying to clear up the truancy and guess what the branch does after you cut it? It comes right back in another year. These are never the problems. Usually it’s down here. So you got to get to that problem... I don’t think truancy is an issue per say, it’s something else … it’s a symptom, but there’s something else there, you know what I mean? I don’t know if that makes sense.

A few participants also described refusing school as a symptom of school phobia, poor parenting, and drug use, although this was not a commonly reported perception.

Illness as School Refusal

Overall, most participants considered illness a major reason for why some students do not attend school. Participants who discussed illness mainly included student support personnel (specifically guidance counselors, health services staff, and social
workers) and teachers. There was a noticeable absence of such themes from discipline and administrative personnel, and school psychologists. Some participants would describe common illness, such as colds, as reasons for general absences among students. Many participants indicated that this is rarely the case, and typically, students are not often sick enough to necessitate absences. For the most part, they believed these illnesses are not legitimate excuses. Two major themes related to illness as school refusal emerged including the dichotomization of illness into legitimate or non-legitimate illness, which included sub-themes related to the appropriate and inappropriate use of the hospital homebound program and the notion of “claiming illness,” and mental illness as school refusal.

**Legitimate and non-legitimate illness.** Illness was viewed by participants as a reason, cause, and excuse for school refusal. Many participants delineated between legitimate and non-legitimate forms of illness.

Sometimes it is a legitimate health issue and sometimes they need attention (Ms. Chad, middle school social worker).

Kids that are legit, legitimately sick or legitimately need to go home, have a tendency to be very specific and make eye contact, and kids that are not are very vague. They look down, you know. So that’s probably key (Ms. Fleming, high school health assistant).

Within both categories of illness, the boundaries for what constitutes legitimacy was somewhat flexible. Most school personnel considered chronic and medically diagnosed illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, and other specific issues legitimate. Participants seemed more likely to describe a student’s illness as legitimate if there was a confirmed diagnosis on file, absences were documented with a doctor’s note,
and parents were cooperative with the school. Several personnel highlighted examples of students who were manipulative in the use of their diagnoses to get out of school. Of the participants expressing these perceptions, most related it to students who had some type of chronic illness, like asthma.

I think some of them use… and I don’t tend to be a very sympathetic person, so I think some of them know that they have these conditions and use them to their advantage, like the ones that have asthma or the ones that have these, you know, allergies or whatever that they’re having. I think some of them tend to play on them (Mr. Duvall, middle school teacher).

Ironically, asthma was also one of the conditions that participants discussed as not being legitimate in all cases. Several participants indicate that parents will “claim” their child has asthma, but fail to cooperate with the school in providing medications to the nurse, doctor’s notes, or enrolling them in homebound.

We had a boy who his mother said he was home all the time because of his asthma, but we had no medications at the school and she couldn’t get out to the school so the social worker and I went to her home, and talked about it, and picked up the inhaler, got her to sign the consent and everything. He still did not come to school and actually he’s been through attendance mediation and he is doing better now but still has more absences than he probably ought to. Meanwhile, never once while he’s been at school has he come to use his inhaler. So this is telling me that his asthma really isn’t the issue (Ms. Reynolds, middle school nurse).

Interestingly, this same participant observed that students with serious chronic illnesses typically have better attendance, as it is more likely their illness is controlled.

An interesting example of a legitimate illness becoming a non-legitimate illness emerged within one specific school setting. At a middle school, every single participant I interviewed mentioned the same female student who was, in their opinion, refusing to attend school. It was the consensus of these personnel that this student, who had a
doctor’s diagnosis of a legitimate female related illness, had come to be considered as having a non-legitimate illness. Participants in this setting believed the student was manipulative, her parent uncooperative, and the doctor’s proposed therapy unacceptable. All participants indicated that this student used her illness to refuse to attend school. Participants’ reported that their perceptions of this student were also affected, if not reconfirmed, by comments made by the student to various personnel that she would be famous one day, and did not really need an education.

Hospital homebound was often discussed as a solution to helping children with chronic illnesses return to school. Participants did not elaborate on hospital homebound and chronic illness, except to explain that it is usually an option for very ill students (e.g., if a student has a cancer diagnosis). Several participants in relation to school phobia discussed hospital homebound. School phobia was considered by some participants as a diagnosed illness. While these participants believed that such a diagnosis was legitimate, several expressed concerns over how children actually received such a diagnosis. A few participants described what one referred to as “doctor-shopping,” which was described as when a parent takes the child from doctor to doctor until they get a diagnosis that warrants hospital homebound. Most participants expressed that this usually accompanied a diagnosis related to emotional or mental health. There was concern related specifically to students with diagnoses of school phobia going on homebound, as participants believed it went against the best interest of the student.

Many participants used the word “claiming” when talking about students and illness as a reason for their attendance problems. They would often discuss students’ claims of illness as not being a legitimate excuse for absences.
I have, you know, the one child who wants to go to our clinic every other day, you know, she signs out a lot and she’s got a sniffle or she has this or, you know, everything just doesn’t ring true. She’s asked me to go to the restroom and the next thing I know she’s down at the clinic… in my mind she’s pulled a fast one and I question if she’s really sick (Ms. Dean, middle school teacher).

Many participants described students who claim they are ill and experience somatic illness, and cannot seem to stay in school all day. These students are described as exhibiting a pattern of leaving school early and visiting the clinic regularly. These students are seen by some school personnel as frequent fliers who do not like certain classes or are experiencing stress-induced illness.

We call ‘em frequent flyer, the student that comes to the clinic oh a couple or three times a week. There’s not a real health issue. They’re either looking to get out of class or just looking for somebody to talk to for a little bit (Ms. Hayes, high school nurse).

Some participants also cited illness resulting from performance or test anxiety.

We have one kid this year who has a tendency every time there’s a test, or she perceives every time there’s a test, or she perceives something’s going on, she ends up going home sick… the mother kind of agrees it’s a stress issue (Mr. Henry, middle school teacher).

Participants also referred to examples of students who would manipulate their parents through illness. Some of these examples were of students with a chronic diagnosis, while others were of students who “faked” illness. Participants considered students faking illnesses as deviant.

It can be a situation that sometimes the child may control what’s going on. Maybe the mother trusts that the child may be ill and the child is not really ill (Mr. Lester, district level).
Regardless of whether an illness is legitimate or not, many participants indicated that absences due to illness could initiate a cycle of school refusal. It was described as occurring when students fall behind due to absences, and then become overwhelmed at the thought of catching up, leading to stress and anxiety at the thought of a return. Refusing school then becomes an easier option.

I think some have health conditions and so it’s just when they’re not feeling well, you know, they get so used to just being out (Ms. Mayo, middle school guidance counselor).

A few participants, mainly school nurses and social workers, identified head lice as an issue. They expressed concerns over no-nit policies, which do not allow children to return to school unless they are free of nits. Participants reported that some children would not return for weeks due to head lice. The parents would “claim” they could not get rid of the nits.

A few participants expressed concerns about Munchausen’s syndrome among the mother’s of students who refuse school because of illness related causes, especially when they do not appear legitimate.

I had a girl last year who seemed to have a million illnesses… to be honest with you it seemed like the mother had like Munchausen’s Syndrome like where she wanted attention and was transferring it on to the child, because the child did not seem that sick to me, but she was absent quite a lot. She was in honors and advanced classes… (Ms. Duvall, middle school teacher).

Sometimes you see cases where you just don’t think the kid is sick but mom sure wants him to be sick, you know, and you kind of get into like the Munchausen’s kind of situation. At least we see that occasionally. I’ve seen that here too, you know? (Ms. Reynolds, middle school nurse).
While this was only brought up by a handful of participants, I believe acknowledgment of issues as serious as Munchausen’s warrant attention within these results.

*Mental illness as school refusal.* Many school personnel referred to mental and emotional issues in terms of how they affect and cause students to refuse school. This included references to both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental illnesses, including anxiety and depression. Participants expressing these perceptions were mainly within the category of student support services.

Often, participants described mental illness as a reason for why students actually refuse school. Participants reported that some students who have a difficult time attending school often are dealing with issues that impede their motivation to attend school. Mental health issues were also indicated as making the school day intolerable or exhausting for students. This was often discussed in relation to depression or anxiety.

Many participants indicated that depression is a concern and should be considered, especially among adolescents. Personnel described depressed students as either having trouble coming to school or staying in school. There were some concerns expressed that these students may not appear depressed, but instead as “troubled” kids who act out and subsequently are punished.

And there is a lot of clinical depression in adolescence I think nowadays, a lot of it. And it manifests itself either in complete withdrawal and inactivity, heavy sleeping, which they can’t get out of bed and go to school to acting out in which case school personnel will send them home for acting out behavior which only reinforces the whole cycle and so the next day they might not come to school because they were kicked out the day before. So that whole cycle I see goes on and on and on (Mr. Vernon, district level).
There were also concerns about the students who slide through school unnoticed, who might also be experiencing depression or anxiety. They tend to know the troublemakers first and then the ones who get all their homework and they answer every question. They know them first, you know, but those quiet students that kind of sit quiet, passing through, those are probably your most at-risk kids, particularly if there are other issues, you know, maybe they’re depressed or something going on at home… (Ms. Stein, district level).

One participant provided a story of his own son, who suffered from depression that led to school refusal, but remained “unknown” to his school. He stated that:

My son missed tons of school. I never saw… heard… even had a phone call from a truancy officer, the resource officer, or the school social worker, who after 16 days of unexcused absences is supposed to come to the house, do all of these things (Mr. Vernon, district level).

Anxiety and stress related anxiety was discussed as another reason why students refuse to attend school. High stakes testing was cited as being responsible for stress-induced anxiety in some students. Middle school personnel discussed anxiety issues more so than high school personnel did. One participant described it as follows:

No, it’s not common, but it happens more than we would think probably and it probably goes undetected a lot. When I worked at another [middle] school, at [school name], we… there were four or five children at any given time [anxious about coming to school] (Ms. Berkley, middle school social worker).

_Schools and their Environment_

Several district personnel and teachers, along with a few guidance counselors and middle school social workers, described elements and aspects of the school environment that they believe can motivate or exacerbate a student’s refusal to attend school. Several participants reported that some students who refuse school feel unsafe in the school
setting. Several reasons provided for this included bullying (perceived or real), threat of a major violent attack, negative teachers, and a negative school climate.

The actual structure of the school environment and school day was also said to be a motivating factor. This was discussed primarily in relation to the transition that students experience when moving from an elementary to middle or middle to high school. The actual size of schools, including the physical building and number of students and teachers can lead some students to feel isolated. A few participants said that certain elements and expectations of the school day in secondary school could be overwhelming. Examples offered included changing classes, using a locker, and dressing out for physical education.

Participants cited the change in school climate and culture that occurs between primary and secondary school as well. Participants referred to elementary school as more nurturing than middle or high school, indicating that this change in the overall climate may deter some students.

The climate of schools was apparent to me when conducting observations. Differences were mainly in the student affairs office. Interactions between personnel are business like and abrupt in the high school student affairs office. At one high school, I felt uncomfortable and unwelcome. The secretary stared at me when I introduced myself. When I asked if I could sit in one of the chairs in the front, she simply shrugged. In the middle schools, interactions appeared friendlier, with secretaries smiling more and talking longer to students. Likewise, the increasing social milieu of secondary schools can make some students uncomfortable, especially if they feel they cannot find their niche.
If they have a feeling of not belonging with the school structure or within the peer group that’s in the school, I find that to be a big one here at this school (Ms. Cameron, middle school teacher).

Several participants indicated that schools’ academic environment and emphasis on high stakes testing has created a climate that makes it difficult for students who do not “naturally” excel in school. The current educational climate in general was described as catering to college bound students. A few participants expressed that school is designed as a “one size fits all” approach; therefore, by the very nature of it there will be students who do not fit that mold.

I think we lean awfully heavy on academics for children who don’t fit into those slots very well, yet those children will leave, they’ll go (Ms. Stein, district level).

I think that we need to find a way to meet the needs of all of our students. I think the students that have trouble coming to school, as I said; they’re not coming because we’re not offering them what they need… We’re kind of unique in this country in that we offer free education to everybody until they graduate from high school, but we only offer... we offer kind of a one size fits all approach (Ms. McMullen, high school teacher).

Participants also cited low levels of school connectedness as adding to the reasons for school refusal. School connectedness refers to the feelings of attachment and belonging a student has towards their school. This appears to be related to the aforementioned issues of climate and culture.

A lot of kids don’t make a connection…they’re not in an activity of any kind that draws them to school, to connect ‘em to school (Mr. Bender, high school teacher).

There are so many children that get lost and nobody knows them and they don’t feel connected...(Ms. McMullen, high school teacher).

There’s no connection. There’s no connection at all. You know, the things that we’re doing, you know, just in the culture of the school itself, you know, if they don’t feel like they’ve got friends here, if they don’t feel like they can connect
with anybody, if they don’t feel like anybody cares, and if they don’t feel like they get the help they need, what’s the point of staying? (Ms. Donnelly, high school guidance counselor).

Personnel’s perceptions of the school environment appear to indicate very real implication for school refusal behavior in the school setting. As indicated in these results, issues of safety and a sense of belonging are perceived as being associated with school refusal.

*Cycles and Patterns of School Refusal*

District level participants and guidance counselors described and referred to “cycles” or “patterns” of absenteeism that can be an indicator or trigger of school refusal. General attendance issues were said to follow patterns as well. Patterns were described in terms of the individual student and overall within the student population. The three themes that were associated with patterns included school transitions, a past history of patterns, or academic difficulty.

Several participants indicated that patterns of attendance will sometimes alert personnel to the presence of an attendance issue. Patterns of school refusal were also cited as occurring at transitional periods within schooling.

We have seen a pattern of children missing school, perhaps refusing, when children change grades, meaning like from fifth to sixth, there’s a change from elementary to middle and then from eighth to ninth, which is looking now towards entering high school (Ms. Richard, district level).

Historical patterns also serve as indicators personnel look for when identifying a student with school refusal. Several participants noted a history or pattern of attendance
problems as well as generational or familial cycles of excessive absenteeism as an indicator and reason.

You have generations of families that tend to have similar problems. And one of the things that we try to do is break the cycle (Mr. Ipkiss, district level).

A few participants also said that learning disabilities or academic difficulties could lead to a cycle of absenteeism. Participants emphasized how patterns and cycles of absenteeism affect cumulative learning that occurs in the classroom. Hence, the more a student misses school, the further they fall behind and feel the growing anxiety of catching up with their peers.

It becomes a real negative situation for the child because they too get caught up in a cycle of, “If I have six classes and I miss three days, three times six, I’ve missed 18 assignments and 18 classes that I should have been there taking notes; 18 assignments.” Can you imagine what it’s like to have to make up 18 assignments...? And so, you know, there are a lot of kids who, again, that vicious cycle of absenteeism, making it up, absenteeism, and before you know it they’re so far behind they give up and they stop working. A lot of ’em just stop functioning altogether in class (Mr. Bueller, district level).

He just... he’s kind of gotten into that cycle that, you know, he’s not meeting with much success when he is here so it’s easier to stay home and it feels better to stay home so why go? (Ms. Grace, high school guidance counselor).

The issue that concerned personnel was not simply that absenteeism caused a student to fall behind. The concern was the reciprocal relationship they described; absenteeism causes the student to fall behind, the student’s distress increases, and thus miss more school due to stress.

Describing the Student with School Refusal

This category focuses on school personnel’s descriptions of the actual students, whereas the last section described reported perceptions related to the behavior of refusing
school. It illustrates the descriptive dimensions school personnel use when thinking
about, talking about, and describing the students who they identify as experiencing school
refusal. This section begins with a description of how school personnel construct their
reported perceptions of students’ who refuse school, including the perspective from
which they arrive at their constructions and the descriptive attributes they associate with
these students. I then proceed to deconstruct school personnel’s stories of school refusal,
in an effort to examine how they differentiate and evaluate their experiences with
students. This section culminates with an overview of the nine typifications of students
that have emerged school personnel’s stories.

Constructing the Student Experience of School Refusal

I asked participants to share their thoughts on what they think students who refuse
school are experiencing. This was not something that always emerged within their stories
about students, but when asked, most participants were more than willing to share their
perceptions of what these students might be experiencing. Less than five participants
declined to respond to my questions, offering the explanation that they did not feel
comfortable answering such a question, as they had not been in the student’s place
before. Other participants would indicate, within their response, what perspective they
were basing their comments on: their profession, imagining themselves in students’
shoes, or thinking about their own experiences as a student or as a parent of a student.
Below are a few excerpts that illustrate how participants verbally defined their frame of
reference.

And I’m probably biased in my viewpoint ‘cause I’m a psychologist but…

I think it’s devastating, and again, I talk from personal experience…
It is beyond my comprehension how a thirteen-year-old, how my thirteen year old could tell me I’m not going to school?

You know it’s hard for me to say because I try to put myself in their shoes and I try to imagine what I was like at their age and I don’t have half the issues that some these kids have…

It’s hard for me to say because I loved school. That’s why I’m an educator. So for me the concept of not, you know…I did a lot of things in my previous positions with bullying and harassing and things like that. That’s definitely a reason that kids don’t want to come to school if they’re being bullied or harassed. They don’t feel that there’s any connection for them here so that connectedness again, you know, would be a reason. You know, it’s not important to their family…It’s hard… for me to say what is going through their minds…

*Internal versus external experiences of the student.* Descriptions of student experiences were discussed in terms of two perspectives: what the student experiences internally (i.e., emotionally or mentally) and what external experiences lead to refusal. Many participants based their descriptions of what a student experiences either through examples they provided of specific students, or different categories of students they had already outlined within the interview. For example, a participant might discuss what “Joey with school phobia” was experiencing, or what “students who were school phobic” experienced.

Common emotions and feelings of students described by participants included anxiety, depression, embarrassment, failure, fear, frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, isolation, low self-esteem, peer pressure, stress, safety, and uncomfortable. These were considered internal to the student. Fear was typically associated as a key emotion for students who experienced school phobia. Failure, frustration, and embarrassment were used in describing students who were refusing school because they were unsuccessful academically or socially.
Personnel described students as being overwhelmed with external expectations and peer pressure. Descriptions of students who refuse school out of defiance focused on participants’ belief that these students think there are better or more entertaining activities to engage in outside of school.

Not... not... they’re not fearful. They just want a good time, want to be somewhere where they don’t have to be held accountable, you know. And school is not a good time for them, because for whatever reason they feel that being in the classroom is more of a pressure than it is an enjoyable experience (Mr. Kane, high school assistant principal).

Several participants discussed parents who do not enforce the value of education, which they believe leads students to a constant lack of encouragement that enables refusal behavior. Other reasons provided were physical issues such as illness and emotional issues like depression. Many participants also reiterated the various reasons for school refusal, such as bullying, academic failure, fear, and social discomfort, as some of the things that students are experiencing externally.

Family as a description of the student. Comments provided by participants about parents or families centered on how they potentially influence school refusal by serving as a cause, an enabler, or through their own attitudes on education. In terms of causes, personnel described issues of abuse, divorce, and other home problems that make the students either fearful of leaving the home or the parents. Parents were also described as enabling students to stay home through poor parenting practices. A few examples included inconsistent rules, making it easy to stay home or leave school early, and leaving students to get themselves to school on their own. Participants also cited parents’ ideas and values related to education as being a major influence on school refusal.
Many comments about family actually removed the onus of responsibility for school attendance from the student, as participants described parents who “make” their child stay home from school. This was often the case in descriptions of students from families that were migrant, poor, or from single parent households, in which the student is relied upon as a translator, wage earner, caregiver, and/or babysitter. Further, several participants said that students with attendance problems often have parents that are not involved or involvement is limited.

Typically, if I’m dealing with a student with attendance issues, often times the parental involvement is limited (Ms. Lim, district level).

Some participants indicated that students who refuse school have parents who have lost control of them, which was consistent with some participants’ comments about permissive parents. This theme also seemed more common among descriptions of defiant school refusal.

Really, as far as kids who will not come to school, we’ve had several of those. In most cases, the parents at some point have lost control of their kids. The kids run the house (Mr. Blane, middle school assistant principal).

Attributes of students who refuse school. The most common elicited response from school personnel was that students who refuse school could look like or be anybody. Several participants stated that there is not just one characteristic of these students, demonstrating their efforts to avoid stereotypes.

They look like everybody else. There’s not… there’s not any one look that those kids have. They look like everybody else (Mr. Bueller, district level).

If you just… if you were to see ‘em walking down the hall, there’d be nothing about them that would draw your attention (Ms. Dean, middle school teacher).
They look like kids. The situation is regardless of race; regardless of economics (Mr. Blane, middle school assistant principal).

Despite participants indicating that students who refuse school “look like anybody,” many went on to provide details about students, ranging from specific individual students to broad commonalities among students. This is one area where participants were contradictory in their descriptions. While recounting stories about students who refused to attend school, participants would frequently include descriptions that highlighted attributes of students, including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, demeanor, and physical characteristics. Comments about such attributes were more common among middle school personnel, student support personnel, and middle school teachers.

These descriptions often emerged unprompted throughout data collection. I would also generally ask participants what students who were refusing school “looked like” from their perspective. When I would ask this question, many participants would immediately launch into descriptions or stories, with many thinking aloud about how it “brings to mind mental pictures of specific students.” Some participants appeared hesitant to respond, asking, “Do you mean physically?”

The one young lady… where’s the same old dirty sweatshirt every single day. And she’s always sniffling, always wiping her nose on her sweatshirt. The other child I was referring to that sits by himself in the morning at breakfast, he is very tall, very awkward, glasses, pimples, doesn’t have the… he doesn’t have a youthful look to him (Ms. Fleming, high school health assistant).

Well, when you say kids who refuse to attend, I get a mental picture of a rebellious…this is a terrible stereotype, but as you say the phrase, I think of a rebellious, outspoken, stereotypical, you know, hard rock listening music person, maybe even Goth, whatever…that’s what I think of (Ms. Dean, middle school teacher).
Participants discussed males and females equally within their stories and examples of students. Many participants indicated males and females refused school about the same, often verbally reflecting upon their knowledge of the professional literature and statistics about gender.

I think it’s pretty equally divided between males and females, maybe leaning more heavily towards males to some degree (Ms. Ipkiss, district level).

When I think of it, I think of boys, but actually I want to think in my own head the statistics, it’s… there doesn’t seem to be… it seems to be about equal (Mr. Ferris, middle school psychologist).

A few participants said that school refusal occurs more with males, while others indicated females. These participants would also express concern regarding whether their own perception of this was biased. Some participants further delineated gender by the motivating factor for refusal. For example, some believed more boys experienced school phobia while others indicated girls. One participant explained that she notices the girls more and tends to “remember their stories and issues more” than boys, explaining that girls are just more complicated.

As far as gender, I have girls who miss more than boys of my, you know, repeat attendance offenders… but I do notice female absences more than males absences just in general I think (Ms. Flick, middle school teacher).

Some participants explained that there are differences between the genders depending on grade level. Typically, girls were described as having more attendance issues in elementary school, while boys experience them more in secondary school.
While some participants indicated that there are no differences in ethnicity or race, others said that Caucasian students were more likely to refuse school. Students who miss school to serve as caregivers were more often described as female and Hispanic.

In my experience, most of my kids have been Caucasian, African American, or Hispanic. I have not had any... have not seen any Asians. Typically, these kids have not been necessarily disciplinary issues (Ms. Lim, district level).

Some participants indicated that Black students were less likely to refuse school.

I’d say if you want to look at it as a race issue, more white students are absent than black students (Ms. Lisbon, middle school teacher).

I seldom see students who are African-American who are truants, which is interesting (Mr. Claire, high school psychologist).

Participants discussed socio-economic status as a characteristic of students who refuse school. Participants who work in schools with a higher percentage of students from lower income households pointed this out more often.

I was going to say a lot of them are often low SES backgrounds. But there might be some real bias in that because a lot of my kids come to me by referral and I do work in a population where half of our students are low SES (Ms. Dawson, high school psychologist).

I don’t have any research behind... I mean I tend to think of lower socio-economic kids and kids with achievement problems (Mr. Vernon, district level).

Participants described students as having different demeanors depending on the motivating factors for their refusal to attend. For example, participants described students with school phobia or anxiety as introverted, avoiding eye contact, sad, and withdrawn.

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2 I reviewed school level indicators for each school in this study to develop an understanding of each school. This allowed me to make interpretations such as this. These indicators can be reviewed online through the State Department of Education. Examples of indicators reviewed include percentage of students on free or reduced lunch and percentages of various ethnicities. I have not reported the indicators in these findings to maintain anonymity of the participants.
They described students who defiantly refuse school as having negative attitudes and body language. Some described students in general as being depressed and quiet. Several participants mentioned that students “looked like” they had low self-esteem or were passive. Some participants viewed students who refused school as unkempt, not appropriately dressed, and with poor hygiene. Others indicated that such students often do not have the most stylish clothing. Conversely, some participants reported that students were nicely dressed and well groomed. A few participants indicated that students who have consistent problems related to attendance appear thinner and ill.

_The Reported Disconnect of Students’ Perception of Reality_

Although this particular theme of student’s perceptions of reality was not very strong across all categories of personnel, it warranted a small section to present these findings. Discussions of reality and students’ perceptions of it and the reported disconnect that personnel perceive, were unprompted and as well, unexpected. This was often in the form of speculation about the experience of students’ who refuse school. Several participants described students’ perception of reality in relation to the following issues: bullying, fear, anxiety, fame, and student teacher relations.

When describing students who are refusing school due to fear or anxiety resulting from a bullying situation, participants commented on the student’s perception of reality. They indicated that they must be aware that whether or not bullying is “actually” occurring, personnel must be cognizant of the student’s perception of reality. Participants reported that students will “claim” someone is picking on them, but when they monitor the situation, they see nothing happening. Participants wondered if they are dealing with
a situation they cannot see, or a situation imagined by the student. Teachers who
described these types of situations often added that they find this to be frustrating.

There had been some... he had, you know, talked with the assistant principal
about the bullying and the teasing that he felt and about the whole incident at
lunch. They did an investigation like they would do when any other children come
and talk and there was no real belief that things were happening. So then you look
at well is this perception, you know, is someone saying a word and it’s becoming
misconstrued in his perception or are these children really meaner than they are or
are people, you know, are the kids just being sly and so it’s going under the zone.
What’s really happening? But it got to the point that in the morning he would give
the mom a hard time about getting in the car. If she would get him in the car to
come, he would... he just cried unmercifully when he got here (Ms. Berkley,
middle school social worker).

A few participants discussed various students who have perceptions of reality that
involve impending fame; and in turn, their motivation for education is low. Conflict with
teachers was also an issue that involved delineation of student reality versus the actual
situation.

Deconstructing Stories of School Refusal

School personnel had extensive experiences with students who refuse to attend
school. I asked participants to tell me stories of students they had worked with who were
refusing to attend, and most were able to provide multiple stories. It appeared that
personnel with many years of experience had a difficult time telling specific stories about
students than those with fewer years of experience. Some participants would even explain
that they had been working in schools for so long, many of the students’ faces and names
blur together, making it hard to recall specific details. Such explanations were often
accompanied by long thoughtful pauses as they tried to recall at least one student.
Overall, their stories provided insight into their perceptions and experiences with students
who refuse school, as well as the process of identifying and intervening in these situations. This section starts with an examination of how personnel differentiate students, and then proceed to explore how personnel evaluate their experiences with students.

**Differentiating Students**

School personnel struggle to differentiate between the various reasons students refuse to attend school. The most obvious differentiation, students who are refusing and those who are not, is easy to make due to the obvious lack of attendance associated with school refusal. The manner in which personnel report differentiating between the reasons students refuse was primarily individual contact with the student and parent, which was discussed as formal or informal. This could be in the form of a brief conversation with the student, a phone call to the parent, a formal interview with the student, or a parent conference. Emphasis was placed on the importance of making decisions and differentiating on an individual basis.

The way I differentiate between them is to talk to the child to find out what’s going on. When you get them one-on-one and you get to the point where they understand that you’re, you know, spending your time with them because you want to help them, most kids will open up (Mr. Blane, middle school assistant principal).

Reviewing student attendance patterns and history was also a factor considered by personnel. If a student does not have a history of attendance problems, it seemed to cause more concern than if a student does have one.

What’s the pattern, you know? Was this is this a new pattern, old pattern? What’s going on? (Ms. Berkley, middle school social worker).
Personnel differentiate students in various ways that have been described previously, but for convenience are provided here briefly: reasons for refusal (internal or external), grade level, legitimacy of the reason, and student locus of control. While the majority of personnel differentiated students similarly, school psychologists were the only group to openly consider learning disabilities as a possible reason for refusal. Part of their role in the school setting is to conduct tests for such disabilities, thus it is a logical differentiation. School health services personnel were also different as they delineated students based on the frequency of their visits to the clinic and requests to sign out.

_Evaluating Experiences_

Several key factors appear to affect how school personnel think about and evaluate their experiences with students who refuse school. These factors represent perceptions that participants have derived from their experiences with students, and may play a role in how school personnel identify and work with students in the future. These factors center on three main themes – personnel’s interactions with students, other personnel, and parents.

*Interacting with students.* Within some stories, participants described their actual interactions with students. Likewise, I asked specifically for participants to reflect on these interactions. The district level personnel reported few interactions with students given the nature of their work as administrators. Many participants working within the school setting believed they have a good rapport with students in general. Interactions with students were considered as being individualized.

Personnel have varying types and levels of interaction with students. Those who are in the disciplinarian role described being perceived as the “bad guy” because they,
especially assistant principals, are responsible for assigning disciplinary action to students. The personnel in charge of official documentation of attendance, mainly the attendance clerks, have little if any interaction with students, except if a parent calls to excuse them. Teachers expressed frustration with these students because of the amount of attention needed for one student, given they have an entire class to attend to.

Setting the tone of the interaction also characterized participants’ interactions with students. Most participants stressed the need to make the student feel comfortable when talking to them about why they are refusing school and make it a positive encounter. Participants explained that typically they would talk to the student privately in their office or in a conference type setting. Teachers reported that they mainly question students individually about their absences before or after class, so as not to embarrass them in front of the class.

I usually haul ‘em out in the hall so they’re not in front of the whole class and ask them what’s happening, and is it something they want to talk about, because you can’t to begin to address the problem unless you know what the problem is (Ms. Metzler, high school teacher).

Participants depicted students as being honest and open about what was causing their problems attending school. A few did say that students could be disrespectful, belligerent, and evasive, at least until the students understand they just want to help them. Participants would also delineate their interactions by the “type” of student. For example, one participant indicated they would approach the interaction with the student with an authoritative nature, depending upon the student, or the reason for their refusal. Another told me that if the student has “school phobia” they have to try to convince them little by little to come to school.
Participants would often reflect and evaluate their own actions while discussing their experiences and interactions with students. This mainly included reflection on the manner or tone of their interactions with students who are refusing to attend. A few participants who talked about their tendency to joke around or tease students about excessive absences expressed that this might not be the best approach. For example, one participant said:

I used to be especially hard on him cause he wouldn’t come to school. I’d tease him all the time. Hey, you woke up this morning. Glad you could join us. Did you get your breakfast? Hey, I got some here if you don’t…I got an extra doughnut, you know, tease him about it…even though I was joking, I wasn’t doing him a bit of good. So, I started congratulating him for coming to school. Hey, did you get that make up work done? (Ms. Cameron, middle school teacher).

A few participants described themselves as being hard on students when they did come to school. Additionally, they explained that they do not feel a connection to students who are frequently absent.

The kids who are not here I just don’t feel like I have as personal of a relationship with them just because the interactions are less. You know, and I guess if I really stopped to think about it then those are the kids that maybe need even more interaction from us because they might feel left out (Ms. Flick, middle school teacher).

Although this type of self-evaluation was infrequent, it is important to note as part of participants experiences.

*Other personnel.* Beyond examining their own perceptions and interactions, I asked participants to reflect on how other personnel interact with students. The category of personnel most discussed by participants was teachers. Participants, including teachers themselves, reported that teachers would rather students who refuse school or have
excessive absenteeism not come to school. This was explained as an attitude resulting from the added effort teachers must put forth to “catch the student up” through make up work and remedial help. Some teachers see it as unfair to the rest of the class. Teachers were reported as saying, “out of sight out of mind” and “we teach the ones that come.”

Participants discussed the role of personnel as it relates to their demeanor in working with students who refuse. Guidance counselors were described as caring and nurturing in their interactions with students. If personnel had children of their own, they were described as being more empathetic than those who do not.

Administrators were thought of as more discipline focused and concerned about the school attendance rate. They were said to be more likely to withdraw students if they are refusing to attend and are 16 years old, so that it does not affect school attendance rates, which can affect school grade designations. The following quote reveals one participant’s juxtaposition of teachers and administrators:

I think most teachers at some point they’re going to tell you they get frustrated with the non-attenders. There’s a frustration level, because if the kid isn’t there, the kid is missing whatever important things you’re discussing and going over. For administration it’s a different kind of frustration because they’re looking at FTE money, which is the money the get paid from the state (Ms. Metzler, high school teacher).

Perceptions of parental influence. Parental involvement and awareness were major areas considered to either contribute or hinder the resolution of school refusal. Involving the parent in the problem solving process is considered essential, especially if they are unaware or uninvolved to begin with. Parents that are unaware of their child’s refusal to attend are often upset and willing to work with the school.
Sometimes it’s a complete shock for some parents to find out their children have not been attending school (Mr. Bueller, district level).

Parents of children who are refusing to attend due to phobia or bullying are often distraught emotionally. Participants described these parents as willing to work with the school, but frustrating because they often give in to the child due to the emotional stress of the situation.

Parental support or encouragement for education was also considered important. Parents who are not supportive make it more difficult for personnel to convince a student of the importance of attending.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that if a parent had a negative school experience of their own, it can adversely affect their child’s experience. Participants explained that parents might fuel their child’s refusal to attend, through negative attitudes towards the school or teachers. Parents with their own bad experience may distrust the school and teachers, making intervention difficult for both the school and the student.

The issue of parents passing on negative experiences was a source of frustration for many participants.

A lot of parents that we work with, and not all, but many, are mad at the school for whatever reason, they see school as kind of an evil place. They had bad school experiences themselves. They had some misperception that may have been their perception. And maybe they did have a real mean teacher at one time (Ms. Richard, district level).

Lastly, several participants shared their experiences with a phenomenon they referred to as “helicopter parents.” These are parents school personnel consider too protective. They “swoop in and save their kids from everything.” This was seen as negative among school personnel. Parents are expected to be involved, but not to the
point of what personnel view as suffocating. This type of over-dependence was viewed as unhealthy. This was more commonly described in relation to parents of fearful or phobic students and chronically ill students.

Typifications of Students

Participants were adamant that students who refuse school could look like anybody or be any student. However, when asked to tell stories and share their experiences, typifications of students did emerge. Although participants expressed that any student could refuse school at some point in their educational experience, their stories were limited to specific types of students in specific situations. While not all participants provided identical images, several collective descriptions of students developed within the various stories that were told. In the following section, I provide an overview of my interpretation of these images or types of students who refuse school.

Overarching all of the typifications were a few key dynamics that seemed important to how participants defined these categories of students. The five main dynamics, as I have termed them, include level of parental control, parental awareness, student locus of control, blame, and victim status. The dynamics of parental control, parental awareness, and student locus of control, appears to represent a continuum of responsibility (parental or student), and thus provides the opportunity for blame.

Within their descriptions of the various categories of students, participants would often delineate as to whether or not a parent had control of their student and if they were aware that the student was refusing school. Student locus of control refers to whether or not personnel perceive that the student is in control of their decision to attend school. Blame refers to who is at fault for the student’s refusal to attend, and was largely
dependent on who was responsible for the lack of attendance (parent or student). Lastly, victim status, which is related to student locus of control, refers to whether or not personnel perceive the student who refuses as a “victim” or in some way, not responsible for their refusal and in fact is in some way harmed. In this case, the harm is that the student is not in school learning. Essentially, if it appears that a student has less control over a situation that is causing them to refuse school, and there is a legitimate reason, personnel express more sympathy for that student. Table 4 provides the dynamics for each typification, demonstrating the relationships between responsibility, blame, and victim status explained above.

Table 4. Typifications\(^3\) of Students with School Refusal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typification</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Parental Control</th>
<th>Parental Awareness</th>
<th>Student Locus of Control</th>
<th>Placement of Blame</th>
<th>Victim Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defiant Student</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Somewhat Aware</td>
<td>Internal/Control</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Student</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>External/No Control</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing Student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>External/No Control</td>
<td>School/Student</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bored Student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Somewhat Aware</td>
<td>Internal/Control</td>
<td>School/Student</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible Student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically Refusing Student</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>External/No Control</td>
<td>Partial Blame on Parents</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially Uncomfortable Student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Somewhat Aware</td>
<td>External/No Control</td>
<td>Partial Blame on Parents</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick Student</td>
<td>If legitimate illness, high – otherwise low</td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>If legitimate – external otherwise internal</td>
<td>If legitimate illness is blamed, otherwise student</td>
<td>If legitimate yes otherwise no.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Somewhat aware</td>
<td>External/No Control</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) In some instances, the various dynamics did not emerge within typifications. This may be due to the need for more data, or that for those typifications the dynamics do not apply, or in the instance of the invisible student, the personnel do not know enough about them to articulate these dynamics.
The following sections provide brief overviews of the various types of students described by personnel. These include the following: the defiant student, the adult student, the failing student, the bored student, the invisible student, the physically refusing student, the socially uncomfortable student, the sick student, and the victim. As part of developing an image for each type of student, I describe the students as “these students are…” as opposed to repeatedly stating “these students are described as….” This is to allow an image to form more clearly. While I caution that these descriptions are representative of my interpretation of the participants’ perspective, it is important to note that the labels I use to characterize these typifications are my own, having emerged from my interpretation of the participants’ stories; all typifications are grounded in the data and in some instances, the labels used are representative of the participants’ language. Throughout the typifications, I also provide quotations of the participants’ narratives that illustrate examples of each typification. At the end of all of the descriptions, I provide composites for the typifications of the defiant student and the sick student that offer a more detailed image.

The Defiant Student: “They’re not fearful; they just want a good time”

Participants described these students as “willfully disobeying” and “joy seekers” who pursue activities outside of school in search of entertainment. One participant called these students the “I don’t cares.” They are perceived as being in control of their refusal, although their peers influence them. Sometimes personnel perceive that they are involved in dangerous or illegal activities such as drug abuse or gangs. They often refuse school by way of skipping classes, leaving campus, or not attending at all.
A lot of what I’ve seen is maybe peer pressure from other students. In particular, I had a student in my Honors class that never showed up the first day and I didn’t know if she was … she was on my roster, but we have a lot of mistakes at the beginning with schedule changes. I didn’t know that she wasn’t … that she was still supposed to be in there. And for 3 to 5 weeks she never showed. And we get new rosters and she’s still on my roster. I said she’s not here. She’s not coming. Come to find out she had been skipping since day one. And asked why? She was coming to 2nd period every day. And I could … if I was asked to identify her at the time, I would not be able to cause I’d never seen her. She just said cause my friends wanted to hang out at lunch. And that was the reason why she didn’t want to come to class and it was an Honors class. She will not be … she will not returning to me in that Honors class come Thursday. But peer pressure has a lot to with it (Mr. Edmond, high school teacher).

Participants often reported that the parents of these students are usually not aware that their child is not attending or skipping school. Some personnel indicated that they think these students are sometimes rebelling against parents, because of parental pressure. Others believed that parents might have simply lost control of their child. Personnel considered this to be deviant behavior on the student’s part, but do not appear to place blame on the parents, as they do with other types of students. This appears to be because of the parents’ general lack of awareness, as they are being duped as well.

We had one I think about three years ago, two years ago who … she was absent for almost a month straight and we’re like what’s going on? You know, we would ask kids what’s going on with this person? Apparently she would walk to the bus stop and she’s skipping school that whole entire time and the parent was like why … why didn’t, you know, why didn’t I know? And we do have people that call, but the only thing I can guess is that if they called she didn’t have an answering machine or maybe the child picked up and things like that. So … and we had sent things home and the parent just hadn’t gotten it. And the child just decided that they didn’t want to come to school, I guess (Ms. Libson, middle school teacher).

Participants did consider these students to be at a higher risk for dropping out, especially if they are close to 16 years of age. These students are not considered victims, and personnel did not display any sympathy for this type of student.
The Adult Student: “They are the quasi-head of the household”

The adult student is described as a student who takes on a role of responsibility that exceeds the normal expectations of a child in middle or high school. The responsibilities are so demanding that school often becomes a second priority. The reasons that participants provided for why students take on these roles included family pressure, the student’s decision, or there is no choice.

I had a young man who had just moved from Puerto Rico with his mom and his sisters. He really was very angry about a lot of things. Number one: he didn’t want to be the man of the house, because that’s what was expected of him. He was expected to be strong, be the man of the house. He was expected to behave, to make good grades, and do what he had to do to graduate, cause that was his job. And in the eyes of his mother that was the way he needed to behave, and he was very angry with that role. His deal was, and he actually said I am not an adult and I shouldn’t have to be in this role (Mr. Bueller, district level).

Parents were often described as not only being aware of their student’s extended responsibilities, but also often being responsible for placing them on the child. In fact, many participants explained that parents keep students home to work, provide day care, care for an ill adult, and/or serve as a translator. One participant exclaimed that “parents don’t see anything wrong with this.”

Students, for the most part, were considered to lack control of this situation, and therefore were not blamed. Instead, parents were blamed although participants appeared to be understanding to an extent. They described this as an issue that is entrenched in low socio-economic status, and is something that occurs out of necessity. Many participants believed that these families do not place a high value an education. These students, often described as female and Hispanic, are considered victims of poverty, society, and of their families’ values.
This year I have the young man who’s running his household. At first I was concerned because his absent rating was so high and he was in my homeroom. First period of the day I never saw him. First 9 weeks I think he must have came to school on time 5 times. So I thought something was seriously wrong and I intervened with social, I intervened with guidance. I never really found out … I actually stumbled into it because I saw him down in the office with his mother and he was handing her money. And I asked what was going on and mom says well he pays the bills and he hasn’t given me my weekly allowance. And my heart sunk, because here’s this, what I perceive as a little boy, who was in fact a young man cause he’s responsible not only for taking care of younger siblings at the house, but he’s paying mom an allowance because mom and dad come from a split family and dad had said son I entrust you with the money and you run your house, and it makes you look at that person, that young man as a whole different person. And I can’t even imagine a 14-year-old having that type of responsibility and that type of torn allegiance. Here he’s supposed to be a 14-year-old but he has other obligations. Well why should he come to school? Why would he want to come to school? He’s got … he’s got to go pay the cable bill, or mom is in trouble and he’s got to go handle his “business” (Ms. Cameron, middle school teacher).

There were also students within this description who actually are raising their own families, working full-time, and trying to continue their education. These students were seen as dedicated, but struggling. Some students were dealing with major life changes, like a death of a parent, or a divorce.

A few students within the category of the adult student were conceptualized differently. These students were more likely to be higher SES, and making their own conscious decision to work to meet their needs, like paying for car insurance. These students were considered victims in a sense, but victims of modern living. These students’ parents were described as assuming that students can take care of themselves. One participant believed that schools do not accommodate the working needs of today’s students, and should consider this in the school day schedule.

None of the students within this category were described as actively refusing school, and in most cases, it is considered completely out of their control.
The Failing Student: “Caught in a vicious cycle”

The failing student is described as caught in a cycle of academic failure. This can lead to school refusal because when the student meets with repeated failure it becomes easier not to attend. Participants commented that some of these students have been retained at least once or are promoted but unable to do the academic work. Likewise, participants indicated that some of these students are sometimes older than the rest of their classmates, due to retentions. Some participants described these students as struggling with reading and learning issues. These students are frustrated, unmotivated, and feel they have no control over the direction in which they are headed. Participants indicated that as these students are unsuccessful it affects their self-perception.

Parents and their level of control or awareness were not discussed in relation to these students. Participants did discuss whether the parents of these students were themselves unsuccessful in school and how that plays into whether parents motivate their children to do better. Standardized testing and benchmarks were discussed as barriers to graduation for these students.

Very little was mentioned in terms of blame. The exception was when one participant flat out stated, “I blame our schools, the ways the schools run…we don’t offer enough alternative choices of educational styles for slow learning students and students that have reading and academic difficulties.” In fact, other participants lamented that schools are slow to change and only offer a type of one size fits all education. There was a higher level of concern expressed about these students’ futures and they were referred to as being at-risk. These students were viewed as victims, and participants appear to be at a loss for how to “save” them.
There were days that I’d go and look for her. I remember this one day and the grandmother and I were pretty, no teeth, pretty friendly by then, and, you know, was out there and I’m real non-threatening when I go out. I’m just like, you know, talking to ‘em and everything. Where is so and so? She’s in the bedroom. So I said okay, do you mind? So I opened the door and I’m like what are you doing, you know? Then I asked her, come on, you’re going, get dressed and the grandmother’s like you can take her. So I brought her and on the way we stopped at McDonald’s and I said, you know, are you hungry? Let’s just stop at McDonald’s. She hardly said 2 words this whole time and I said what’s going on, you know, and everything and her family was telling her that was going to be the star of the family, that she hadn’t missed going on, and that she would go the furthest, and she was flunking and she was devastated cause she was supposed to be the bright future for her family and she was flunking and she was letting everybody down and she couldn’t take it. So we talked for a long time. By the time … so she came and she did fairly well for a little well then she, you know, but she would get a little attitude too and everything and … but I really felt bad for her. I felt like, you know … but like you go out and say what’s going on? Well she missed the bus or we had … we can’t do anything with ‘em or I mean there’s always a reason. Homework never got done. There’s never, you know … ample opportunity. We’d try to set up meetings and, you know, I’d go out to try and get the family involved. Whether or not this little girl was going to be a bright star, she wasn’t doing very well. That was really devastating to her. She was a sweet kid. I have … I mean she was, you know … one of the children you just wanted to take home with you or something because she was a good kid. I don’t know how she would fare the long haul but she was just … she was depressed about it (Ms. Berkley, middle school social worker).

The Bored Student: “The lazy gifted student”

Participants characterized the bored student as an individual who is bright and intelligent, but is not being challenged enough within school hence they refuse to attend. Fewer participants described this type of student. Some participants reported that parents are aware of the refusal in some cases.

These students were presented as being in control of their decision to refuse school. This was considered frustrating to many participants, as one expressed, “We’ve got this beautiful mind and it’s being wasted.” Very few personnel associated refusal due to boredom with a lack of academic success. Although many participants did not overtly
express blame, a few suggested that teachers or schools could be the reason. One participant explained that teachers, especially those with tenure, do the minimum that is required of them, and do not make learning exciting. Another described how the emphasis on accountability has created a “teach to the test” environment, which has affected the quality of curriculum and instruction.

Yeah. I had a student. He was very bright. He was in my gifted class when we had truly gifted classes. But he really did not want to get up in the morning. He was very bright, but he didn’t feel like school was doing anything for him. He felt that it was a lot of busy work. And he was actually being very physical with his mother in the morning when she tried to wake him up to come to school. And he had missed many, many days of school. I mean he was just not seeing a need for it. He thought it was just a lot of busy work (Mr. Bender, high school teacher).

*The Invisible Student: “Just passing through”*

While this barely constitutes a “type” of student, participants’ description of the invisible student did evoke an image of a student who is quiet, blends into the crowd, and passes through school unnoticed. There was a sincere concern expressed about kids who go unnoticed, whether they are in school or not. The issue addressed by participants was that if these students refuse school, they might “fall through the cracks.”

You know all the troublemakers. You know all the high achievers. But there are a lot of people that are like invisible. The invisible kid probably misses. Nobody’s relating to him. Well hopefully the teacher knows them all, but they tend to know the troublemakers first and then the ones that get all their homework and they answer every question. They know them first to, you know, but those other guys that kind of sit quiet, passing through, those are probably your most at-risk kids, particularly if there are other issues, you know, maybe they’re depressed or something’s going on at home, or lots of things. (Ms. Stein, district level).

There was not a lot of data to inform the specific dynamics of these types of students, which correlates with the fact that no one knows these students very well to
begin with. I interpreted the participants’ level of concern for these students as a sense of responsibility to acknowledge them.

*The Physically Refusing Student: “Drag ‘em in”*

Participants described these students by the physicality of their refusal to come to school. They refuse to get out of bed, into the car, or out of the car. If the parent tries to force her or him, the child will kick, scream, cry, convulse, and flail about. Some participants also describe these students as physically afraid to come to school.

We have some kids that … whose parents will bring them here. We had one kid, a sixth grade girl, whose father would drive her to school and she would simply refuse to get out of the car. She just wouldn’t do it. And that lasted for about 3 weeks. It’s hard on the parent. You know, you have a daughter who’s convulsing, she’s crying, she’s highly upset, but you don’t want to force her out of the car. You don’t really want to physically remove her from the car because you’re afraid of DFC, you know? You’re more concerned with her emotional state. And we did ask parents to let us know what’s going on and the personnel that’s involved, cause we can generally do a better job of getting her … once you get her to school then that’s half the battle. We can help you get her out of the car and into the classroom (Mr. Hughes, middle school social worker).

The image presented of these students is that they are not able to control this reaction, nor can their parents control them. The parents are described as aware, but at their wits end as to how to handle the issue. Some personnel feel like they are placed in an awkward situation with these students, as they want to help, but cannot physically force the student. Likewise, parents have a hard time doing this as well. One participant told me that if the student having this problem is 16 years of age then the school could withdraw them at this point. There seems to be no one to blame, although some participants did say that parents give in too easily and need to take control. Some of the
students who were described as having been bullied or having school phobia might fall within this typification, as they were frequently described as physically refusing.

*The Socially Uncomfortable Student: “They just don’t fit in”*

The socially uncomfortable student has such a difficult time fitting into the social schema of school it is more comfortable for him or her to stay home. These students are described as not fitting in or unable to find their social niche. This student is made even more uncomfortable at transitional periods during their education, such as moving between schools.

These students were considered to lack control in most cases. Participants indicated that some kids do not fit in because they cannot afford “the right clothes,” meaning the latest fashion trends. A few participants indicated that parents have not taught their children appropriate social skills, thus reflecting some blame on the parents. Likewise, participants highlighted the tendency for students to be judgmental and mean to their peers, thus making social interactions more difficult for these students.

We have one story right now; his mother really, really enables him to stay at home. He doesn’t like school. He has a hard time… has a hard time socially at school. He has a hard time academically at school. So he allows himself to become very angry and then comes down here and insists on calling mom who is very consistent about coming and picking him up and taking him home whenever it is he wants to go home. That’s one of our big ones (Mr. Hoeman, middle school assistant principal).

These students were considered victims of their own awkwardness and social exclusion that results from the tendency for defined social groups within schools. Participants expressed understanding and appeared empathetic when describing these students, sometimes discussing alternate options such as online school.
The Sick Student: “What medical condition?”

As there are expectations within society regarding sick behavior, there are expectations within the school setting as well (Coreil, Bryant, & Henderson, 2001). This was evident within the participants’ image of the sick student. These students are described as refusing school for reasons related to illness, whether it is a “legitimate illness” or not. Participants clearly indicated that they are more willing to understand attendance issues that are due to “legitimate” illness. This particular type of student was not seen as refusing, unless they are “using” their illness status manipulatively. Students viewed as refusing are those that are abusing a diagnosis, have undocumented illness, or non-legitimate illness that results in excessive absences.

An interesting example of how something becomes legitimate can be seen in school phobia. One participant indicated that if a student has a “medical diagnosis of school phobia,” then hospital homebound could be used. Other participants questioned the veracity of school phobia, indicating they really have never seen a “true” or “real” school phobic.

At one of my schools, I’ve got a girl that has abdominal pain. Well we found out she had… she is having discomfort and it’s very true. It’s been going on for a few years now, and recently we even got a note from the doctor that she may be missing 5 to 7 days a month. To me this is really unacceptable. There should be something that can be done. He wrote until the therapy they’ve started kicks in and helps her. It’s been months and she is still doing it. She’ll go home on Friday, maybe after calling her mother 2 to 3 times that week, coming into the clinic 2 or 3 times in a day. She’ll go home on Friday evening and maybe clean the house or fix supper for her mother and then want to go to a football game. And I’ve cleaned house, you know? I’ve made supper. Saturday she might get up and dust or vacuum, at her mother’s every beckon call doing whatever her mother wants and wants to spend the night at a friends. And the mother plays up to this, let’s her go to the game, let’s her spend the night with a friend. Sunday’s she fine, shops at the mall. Monday morning sits in the car for an hour crying because she’s in such pain she can’t get out to come to school. She is one of the most difficult ones
we’ve had to deal with because of this. She’s in such pain throughout the week, and every weekend she runs the entire weekend (Mr. Wyatt, middle school nurse).

The infamous frequent fliers help to illustrate the image of the sick student, but are as well in a class on their own. These students were not considered legitimately ill, however they continually visit the school clinic for an assortment of reasons. These students are trying to get out of class or school. Some participants did reveal that they are concerned that frequent fliers might have an underlying problem, as sometimes they “seem to need to talk.”

If a student is truly ill, when they return to school, there are particular behaviors personnel expect to see, such as requesting make-up work and complying with make-up policies with a positive attitude. For kids who have “real” illness, they lack control over their situation, parents are typically aware and in control of the situation, and there is little blame. The student just happens to be a victim of their particular illness, through no fault of their own.

For the other students who are either abusing their illness or faking it, the student is viewed as consciously controlling their behaviors. These students are not viewed as victims, unless an underlying problem is discovered. Parents are partially to blame for “being manipulated” too easily by their child. For example, parents are considered weak if they pick their child up from school too often. Some participants commented on Munchausen’s Syndrome as the possible reason for some of the student’s illness and subsequent absences. For the most part, these students are not viewed as victim, except in the case of Munchausen’s.
The Victim: “Bullied and abused”

While within each category I have addressed whether or not a student is considered a victim in general, there was entire type of student described that evokes the image of a victim. The victim student overlaps with some of the other “types” of students. The victim is viewed as the student who is bullied, whether it is real or perceived. Students who are bullied will refuse school, sometimes physically, to avoid the situation. Students are described as “claiming” that they are being picked on at school. Many personnel reported that they never witness any bullying so they are dealing with perceptions.

These students’ refusal to attend is controlled by their emotions, particularly fear. Participants did not discuss these students’ parents as much; however, those that did indicated that parents are usually aware, and can be upset at the situation. A few participants stated that the onus is on the bullied student to “step up” and report the situation, or nothing can be done about it. These students are viewed as victims of bullying (real or perceived), although personnel do not show as much sympathy for these students, unless the situation can be proven. Some participants, particularly teachers, indicated that this type of student could be frustrating, especially if the claims of bullying are unfounded.

They may have larger issues in life. There may be substance abuse in the home. There may be physical or emotional abuse that they’ve been witness to that supersedes coming to school. And another is kids who feel threatened at school, who may be being bullied or pushed around, who haven’t got the strength yet to step up and say it’s not okay and to let us know so we can intervene (Mr. Blane, middle school assistant principal).
Also within this type of student, I have included the abused student, who is abused emotionally, physically, or sexually in their home setting. Abused children were described as refusing school to either hide signs of abuse, avoid questions, or out of fear. The control of the refusal to attend is sometimes internal, unless the abuser is keeping them home. This student is considered a victim. Participants who discussed this type of student expressed empathy.

Composites of Two Typifications of Students

The following two composites were created to provide collective images of two of the nine typifications of students. These composites are not representative of one individual student, but instead the collective identities of the students’ personnel described in their stories. The names provided for these students are fictional.

Jose: The defiant student. Jose is a tenth grader who regularly leaves school or does not attend. When he is in school, he is rarely in class all day, and often visits different classrooms or offices. On a typical day, he may visit the school nurse, with a grin and tell her he does not feel well and really needs to go home. She recognizes him from his multiple visits and tells him to take a hike. He then goes over to the student affairs office and complains that he left his books at home and he needs to sign out to go get them. The office secretary tells him if he does not have a pass, he needs to go back to his classroom.

His classmates view him as a class clown and he is popular. He will often join other classmates on an afternoon jaunt to the local fast food restaurant, although oftentimes he will skip school on his own. His teachers are concerned about his future, as although they think he is intelligent, he is never in class, and rarely completes his work to
get decent grades. Assistant principals in the school know him well and keep an eye on him, as they worry he may be involved or get involved in illegal activities. Multiple people in the school have met with him, yet he continues to skip.

He is from a single parent household and has both older and younger siblings. When the school contacted his mother for a meeting, she had no idea he had been skipping. She works long hours and leaves the house before Jose goes to school. When she comes in for a meeting with the school social worker, she is shocked at his absenteeism. In the meeting, she asks him, “Is this how I raised you? I expect you to do better than this.” His reply is a shrug of his shoulders. The mother goes on to express her disappointment, especially given how well his older sister did in high school. She tells him she expects more from him. The social worker explains that if his behavior continues that he and his mother could be taken to court. She also indicates that once he turns 16 the school will kick him out. After Jose leaves the meeting, his mother asks for help. The social worker makes some suggestions, like removing his television or telephone. Later, the social worker sets his file aside, realizing that if she pursues his case further, it will take too long, Jose will turn 16 soon, and there will no longer be a legal reason to continue the process.

_Brittany: The sick student._ Brittany is a seventh grader and makes frequent visits to the school clinic. She often complains of stomachaches and nausea, and a large number of her visits end in her mother coming to pick her up. She has missed many days of school, particularly Mondays and Fridays, although she is always being excused. Her mother has told the nurse that the doctor’s have diagnosed her with irritable bowel
syndrome, but despite multiple requests, they have not received any type of written
diagnosis or confirmation of this illness.

Brittany’s teachers are frustrated with her multiple requests to go to the nurse and
her absences. Every time she is absent, her mother sends a note or emails them to request
her make-up work be prepared, as she indicates she will be picking it up. Sometimes the
mother will not pick up the assignments until two days after she has called. The teachers
are tired of bending backwards to meet Brittany’s needs, when they have a classroom full
of students who are there every day. When Brittany returns from one of her absences, it is
common for her classmates to ask where she has been. One of her teachers always says,
“I’m glad you decided to join us today.”

During a team meeting, her teachers talk about her, triangulating the various
excuses they have received, and the mounting number of absences. One of them decides
that since the mother will not respond to requests for a parent teacher conference, they
should get the guidance counselor involved. One of the teachers expresses anger that the
mother has let the child take advantage of her illness, while another questions
sarcastically, “What illness?” They end their meeting by writing a referral to the guidance
counselor.

Influences on School Personnel and their Understanding of School Refusal

Various experiences appear to influence school personnel’s perceptions and
understandings of students who refuse to attend school. These influences affect how
personnel identify, relate to, and work with students. While I did ask participants to talk
about what influences them, this often was discussed without a prompt.
The collectively constructed story among personnel reflects what I have interpreted as internal and external influences that appear to affect their perceptions. It became clear that internal and external influences were often intertwined. For example, intuition (internal) was often linked to their training (external) within a certain discipline, like nursing or social work. Frustration was a major theme that emerged as an influence on personnel’s experiences and interactions. The politics that relate to attendance issues were also reported as a major influence and source of frustration.

Internal and External Influences on Personnel’s Perceptions

Many participants described internal and external influences that affect their perceptions of students who refuse to attend school. Internal influences included intuition, communication skills, and knowledge. Several participants reported “knowing” a student was having difficulty attending school through intuition and perceptiveness. Some participants believed this perceptiveness was a product of their various experiences in their role and years of experience.

It’s interesting; it’s been interesting for me over the years… you become very intuitive and perceptive about certain students (Mr. Bueller, district level).

The ability to relate to students on an interpersonal level was viewed as a skill that influenced a few participants’ interactions with students. This included the ability to listen, empathize, and connect on an interpersonal basis with students.

My ability to relate [influences me]. Just being a regular person. (Ms. Tartak, high school guidance counselor).

Only a few participants, mostly psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors, indicated that knowledge was an influence on their perceptions of students
who refuse school. Knowledge included information acquired through their college level training or continuing education.

External influences were reported as forces external to the person that impact their perceptions of students who refuse to attend. External influences included training, teamwork, personal and school based experiences, district policies, and information. Training was a major influence mainly among social workers and guidance counselors. They viewed their college level preparation as distinct from other personnel’s, providing them an alternate perspective of students who refuse school.

The social worker perspective is not individual pathology, it is holistic, the kid in their environment. All the factors that influence the child. I look to see what the system is doing wrong. It’s a systems approach. You might be able to change one part and affect the whole (Ms. Chad, middle school social worker).

Participants considered working together with other personnel within the school when addressing issues of school refusal as a process that influences their perceptions of students. Participants’ own educational experiences or experiences as a parent seemed to influence participants, providing a reference point for relating to a student. The most common external influence that was reported was experiences and interactions in the school with students, other personnel, and parents.

I think it’s just drawing on past experiences with those students, because, I myself didn’t experience this, you know? (Ms. Johnson, high school assistant principal).

Some participants reported that having many years of experience influenced their perceptions.

Probably 30 years of experience. I think you understand more about kids the longer you work in the business. I mean you just…you deal with what you’ve got at that moment in time, but I guess you reflect on your experience (Ms. Metzler, high school).
Based on experiences with students, many participants indicated that if the student’s motivation to return and re-engage in school is high, they are more willing to work with and sympathize with them.

The more motivated the student is upon return, the more contact I have with the parent that is legitimate and detailed, the more sympathetic I’m gonna be (Ms. McAllister, middle school teacher).

District policies as an influence were cited by a handful of participants, mostly assistant principals. They often highlighted policies related to attendance rates, goals, and state laws. A few participants commented on the influence of the increased demand for accountability on schools’ response to attendance issues. This will be discussed more extensively within another section (see The Politics of Attendance).

*Frustration as an Influence*

Frustration was a recurrent theme among participants, and was discussed as an emotion that influences and affects not only school personnel, but parents as well. Overall, this theme emerged unprobed, as if participants were waiting to express to me their frustrations.

I don’t know if you’re gonna ask me what I’m frustrated with, but I’m telling you anyway (Ms. Walsh, high school social worker).

The main sub-themes of frustration focus on personnel in general, teachers, parents, and politics.

Many personnel expressed frustration with students and parents of students who refuse to attend school. Frustrations varied among types of personnel. Administrators
were more likely to express frustration related to how students affect the school attendance rate and subsequent funding based on full time equivalency counts.

Administrators get concerned because the school district has a goal of 96% attendance rate, which our school does not have at all (Ms. Mayo, middle school guidance counselor).

Assistant principals were viewed as becoming frustrated from seeing the same students repeatedly and eventually becoming desensitized to the students. Other personnel, such as social workers, are frustrated with administrators who discipline students with attendance problems. Social workers are also viewed as frustrated with the lengthy process of working with chronic cases of school refusal.

If you talk with social workers, who especially at this level, you may see their frustration. They go through that whole process and take ‘em to court and...you spend a lot of time and you’re not getting the results (Ms. Cruz, middle school guidance counselor).

Below, an assistant principal reiterates this sentiment about the slow process and low motivation to work on fixing attendance problems.

I’m very frustrated with a District as large as this that we have a lot of resources and trying to focus those resources on a problem, a particular child’s absenteeism problem for example is very difficult at times. It’s frustrating. It’s like moving a dinosaur. And I suspect that even in smaller school districts it’s still the same problem. It’s not a lack of resources. It’s perhaps a lack of will. The system can only work as well as the individuals in it. The highly motivated people will find a way to get to a child like this. The system does have cracks (Mr. Purr, middle school assistant principal).

One district level participant cautioned that frustration could make personnel blind to the real issue affecting the student. She offered an example of the frequent flier student in the clinic as when a school nurse might become frustrated. She indicated that it
is important to look past the frustration of dealing with the same student, and realize that
the problem may not be physical.

Among personnel, teachers were described as being the most frustrated with
students who refuse to attend and with the procedures of intervention. Teachers also
acknowledged this frustration and the reasons for it. Some teachers did not think so much
effort to get one student back to school made sense, while others were frustrated with the
repeatedly “catching up” students who were absent frequently.

Sometimes as a teacher, we just get frustrated. You know, you’ve missed four
days. You’re starting… you know, I’m tired of catching up (Ms. Cameron, middle
school teacher).

Below a participant describes a middle school boy with “school phobia” who was moving
up to high school and the frustration experienced by his teachers:

And it was very, very frustrating for the teachers, because he needed…he needed
to get over this and the old theory of, you know, expose him to more of it and
he’ll get better definitely was not working in his case (Mr. Bueller, district level)

Personnel perceive parents as being frustrated if they are unaware of their child’s
refusal to attend, if their child’s refusal is based on a phobia, or if the parent feels a lack
of control. In most of these cases, the participants not only acknowledged that these
parents can be very frustrated, but they sympathized more with them.

They’ll call; my child doesn’t want to come. I don’t know why. And, you know,
the parents are frustrated. They don’t really know what to do (Ms. Mayo, middle
school guidance counselor).

*The politics of attendance.* The political side of attendance was reflected within
participants’ frustrations. Many participants discussed the increased pressure placed on
schools, administrators, and teachers to meet the standards set forth by the No Child Left
Behind legislation. Pressure is placed on schools to meet district goals for attendance rates. The logic behind meeting the attendance rate is reciprocal in nature; students attend, learn, and perform well on standardized testing. This not only increases their likelihood of achieving adequate yearly progress, but it also factors into the state assigned school grade. These factors also affect funding for schools. The consensus is that if students are not in school, they will not perform well on the standardized tests. Schools must also meet set attendance percentages on standardized testing days; therefore, a push is made to have maximum attendance on those days. Similarly, participants expressed concern that “pushing students out” is being legitimized as a way to decrease the number of students, particularly chronically absent students who might pull test scores down. The following account from one participant captures the how this plays out in the school:

Attendance is tied to the FCAT and sometimes your school grade… obviously, if they’re not in school, they don’t have the right type credits and that sort of thing, and they’re not going to do good on the FCAT. I don’t know if there’s a word for it, but there’s probably a certain amount of culling or whatever, trying to weed out those kids and get ‘em out of your school because they’re going to hurt you with the overall grade for your school as you’re rated, you know, through the FCAT A, B, C, D, F. So then it’s an amount of oh these are kids that we… they don’t say kick out, okay? We’re kind of taught well we need to provide another opportunity for them because they’re currently not successful. And generally the administrators will generally get a printout of, okay, these are the absentees, these are their report cards, after every report card I’ll run a … it’s a fairly large stack, I’ll run a stack of how many kids received D and Fs in any particular class so I can identify ‘em. I’ll go through and circle. Gosh, failed everything, okay? If the absences are tied to that, but I would imagine the assistant principals would say let’s do a run on how many kids have over five absences. Those usually get downloaded, principal let’s say would say oh we need to talk to these children because, gosh, they’re hurting us with the FCAT score. Look, they scored a 233. They’re not going to make an adequate yearly progress so we need to get rid of them and send them to night school, computer online, one of the career centers or something like that (Mr. Rooney, high school guidance counselor).
Section III: Identification and Intervention in the Practical World

In this section, I begin briefly by identifying participants’ reported descriptions of the protocol and policy for the identification of students who refuse to attend school. A full narrative is provided in Appendix N. I then proceed to use the data to question the authenticity of the reported protocol and policy due to reported deviations from them. The section then documents personnel’s reported concerns for students who refuse school, moving on to their recommendations. This section directly addresses the second purpose of the study, and answers the fourth research question.

Identification of Students with School Refusal

Students who are refusing school are identified by the most obvious means available, which is their attendance record. Patterns of non-attendance were also reported as a common way of identifying students. Students who miss five or more days, consecutive days, or patterned days (i.e., every Monday and Friday) will catch personnel’s attention. Key personnel in identifying students include teachers and health personnel, which often involves multiple layers with the most common path going from the teacher to the guidance counselor on to the social worker. The process of intervening begins at the school level and involves a series of steps that include but are not limited to the following: telephone calls home, letters mailed home after five and ten days of absences, meetings with parents, completion of an intervention form, a Child Study Team meeting, and referral to the social worker. The social worker coordinates the next level of intervention, which includes interviews, the development of an attendance plan, and monitoring. The district protocol starts once a referral is made to the school social worker and can ultimately lead to legal prosecution of the parents or the child.
Deviations from the Intervention Protocol

Personnel described various scenarios where the protocol for attendance issues is not strictly adhered. Examples of such scenarios were dependent upon whether school personnel are aware of the reasons for excessive absences, regardless of whether they are excused or unexcused. This might include some of the previous described situations such as bullying, illness, students serving as caregivers, lack of parental awareness, and emotional issues. These scenarios prompt action on the part of the school; however, there is more flexibility in the responses. Various issues appear to impact personnel in their perceptions of different situations, which ultimately influence their response. It is essential to note these deviations because of the possibility of unintended consequences.

Differentiating student referrals. The participants described a key decision in the referral process that detours from the general process. If a student appears to have some emotional, psychological, or behavioral issues related to their absences, the identifying teacher or other personnel will refer the student to a guidance counselor, the psychologist, or the social worker. If there appears to be a more defiant behavioral pattern related to the absences, the teacher will refer the student to the student affairs office, generally the assistant principal.

This decision has differential consequences for the direction of the intervention process. If a student is referred to the “support services,” it seems that more time is taken to investigate the motivating factors for the student’s refusal to attend. Generally, they adhere to a problem solving, team oriented approach that is thorough and explorative. Participants described multiple conferences with parents, meetings with teachers, and with the student. Various interventions are attempted to integrate the student back into the
school day. However, if the student is referred to student affairs, this is generally viewed as a discipline referral. Unless the assistant principal sees some other indicator, such as an emotional issue, this student could end up with a warning, detention, an out of school suspension, or if over the age of 16, a referral to a general equivalency diploma program or withdrawal from school.

This decision is not described within any official policies at either the school or the district level. It is an individual decision making process that I heard mainly from teachers. Assistant principals, guidance counselors, social workers, and psychologists confirmed this process and their responses to students referred as such.

Generally, it depends on who discovers it. If it’s myself then I’m gonna call the kid in. As the counselor, I’m gonna find out, why aren’t you coming to school, and try to provide some resources. I work very closely with the social worker and the psychologist. And, you know, we work as a team a lot so if I feel I need to pull them in on it…it just depends…if the kid has some psychological issues I’m gonna say…I’m gonna go to my school psychologist and say hey, you know, I got this kid. Let’s say that the assistant principal discovers it. Well it depends on how many days the kid has been out. If you’re talking about somebody that’s been gone for 30 days, you know, and we don’t have any notification on why that person should be gone, that’s probably an automatic withdrawal. If the assistant principal feels hey, this is a kid, they missed a couple of days, you need to try and help ‘em to stay, the assistant principal will bring ‘em here, you know, for us to counsel with ‘em (Ms. Tartak, high school guidance counselor).

Personnel perceptions of the process. Some participants have described the process as lengthy, inconsistent, and confusing. Several social workers also reported that despite the set steps of the process, they often would get referrals for some students who have missed 40 days of school in a year. A major concern is that there are students who could “fall through the cracks” and early warning signs are missed. The process targets “attendance issues” and there is no language or steps regarding student motivations or
reasons for the problem, although participants did describe their attempts to determine these issues within the process.

Perceived Outcomes of School Refusal

Participants, while commenting on the intervention process, often provided insight into the various outcomes that are possible for students who are refusing to attend school. Participants did not delineate these by types of students or reasons for refusal, instead focusing more on overall outcomes. When prompted, they discussed outcomes of students in terms of their concerns for them and the support they perceive to be important for these students. They also provided information about various programs and alternatives that are offered to students who are refusing to attend.

Personnel’s Concerns for Students’ Refusing School

Personnel described a range of outcomes and concerns for students when asked about their concerns for students who refuse to attend school. Most concerns were based on whether or not the students were successful in attending school. Overall, most of the reported concerns were not related to a specific type of student (with the exception of “at-risk” students), but instead focused on more overarching outcomes. Concerns ranged from immediate outcomes, such as dropping out, to long-term societal outcomes such as increased welfare costs, violence, poverty, mental health, and crime. These concerns were not only for students themselves, but also for the impact these students have on future generations.

If they don’t come to school I’m wondering what are they going to do? Are they going to end up being on the street? Are they going to end up being in another institution? If it’s not education, is it gonna be a criminal thing? Are they going to go down that path because if they’re not going into education what are they going into? Are they gonna be a viable member of society or are they going to be, you
know, the problem in society? I don’t know. My goal is to create as many good citizens as I can and, you know, help students understand that education is the way to do that. It doesn’t mean you have to go be a doctor or a lawyer or a Republican. It just means you need to stay in school and have goals (Mr. Frye, middle school teacher).

Participants’ concerns mainly focused on what were described as “at-risk students.” Outcomes such as dropping out, pregnancy, drug abuse, and violence were discussed. Participants were concerned about “cycles of poverty” and the fear that some of the students would be “caught” in the same cycle as their parents.

They’re high risk for poverty. They’re high risk for being neglected. They’re high risk for being placed into foster homes. They’re high risk for being beaten by mom’s various boyfriends. It could go on and on and on. So you have the high risk for pregnancy. You have the high risk for delinquency. While you’re sitting here doing this interview kids who are absent today are vandalizing your car and mine (Mr. Burnham, middle school social worker).

This narrow focus was concerning to me for two reasons. First there is an overwhelming focus on a select segment of students who refuse school. The second is the obvious lack of focus on other students who might be refusing school, however, not mentioned within participants concerns. This can only be highlighted via my interpretation, as the data does not provide direction for interpretation.

A few participants did discuss their concerns for students with phobias or anxiety fueled school refusal. For middle school personnel, their concern was how these students would handle the transition to the even less tolerant or nurturing environment of high school.

Several participants also used the phrase “falling through the cracks” when talking about their concerns for students in general. In this sense, the personnel appeared
helpless in making any difference in the outcomes for the student. The proverbial “falling through the cracks” seemed to be an acknowledgement that there should be more that is done, but inevitably, there are students who will not get the support they need.

Well, some of the students are probably going to fall through the cracks and where they probably could have met some successes in life, won’t, if there maybe wasn’t that strong person behind them pushing them. That’s possibly my biggest concern. They don’t have the support to help them through (Mr. Wallace, high school teacher).

Participants’ perceptions of support required for students who are refusing to attend were considered important. For students to overcome their refusal, personnel indicated there needed to be support from home as well as school. This translated into consistent parental involvement and awareness. This parental support also needed to be cooperative with the school personnel. As mentioned before with “helicopter parents,” personnel perceived parents who were not involved or too involved negatively.

What we try to do is look at it realistically as far as what are we expecting our families to do? And there’s times where there may be a family who is really trying their best and just cannot get over that hump as far as having their kids attend regularly. We’re going to look at that differently than somebody who does not seem to care, or doesn’t seem to understand, or is not taking things seriously (Ms. Ipkiss, district level).

Participants’ view of support, specifically parental support, affected their perception of whether a student was worth the extra effort.

Programs

Many participants provided information about programs, both prompted and unprompted. Most programs mentioned seemed to fall into one of two categories: at-risk or incentive based. At-risk programs target students with indicators of being “at-risk” of dropping out, which typically includes poor or non-attendance. While the notion of “at-
risk” often includes absenteeism as an indicator, it rarely is the main reason for considering a student to be “at-risk.” Incentive programs are based on receiving some type of award for positive attendance behaviors, and can range from tangible awards to acknowledgements. There were no programs that focused strictly on students with “school refusal” or any form of school refusal.

At-risk programs seek to provide students with some type of connection to school, whether it is the program, a person, or other students. These programs can be special classes within school settings, social groups coordinated by school personnel, district wide programs, or mentoring programs (either formal or informal).

Incentive based programs are described as rewarding good behavior and enticing continued performance. Incentive programs for attendance are popular. Part of the idea is to promote a positive climate of attendance, and make school a place where students want to be. These programs target the school, classroom, and individual level. Many participants conveyed mixed feelings about incentives. Some believed it targeted students with good attendance, further reinforcing their behavior while doing nothing for students with non-attendance. A few participants believed it widened the gap between students in the school. One participant indicated that her school ended attendance awards because they often reflected differences in race and class, and personnel were uneasy with sending the wrong impression. Participants also expressed frustration with policies like exam exemption, indicating that it is typically the higher performing students without attendance issues who take advantage of this policy.
Alternatives for Students Refusing School

Many participants reported on alternative options that are offered to students who are refusing to attend school. This was typically offered in cases of students that were not improving, over the age of 16 (sometimes upon being withdrawn), or above age for their current grade level. Assistant principals, guidance counselors, and social workers were the most common personnel who would refer students and parents to the various options. Alternatives described as options included general equivalency diploma programs, career centers, adult school, night school, hospital homebound, and home school. Virtual online high school was an alternative discussed as being appropriate for students who are academically high achieving but are experiencing social problems. This setting allows students to continue rigorous coursework that meets college preparation requirements. One assistant principal explains below the alternatives for one of her students who is getting closer to 16 and having continued problems with school refusal:

I’ll probably withdraw her to either the GED… the underage GED program or the adult school program. Night school or adult school is self-motivating. You know, you’re given the work. You’re given the packet. You do it. You pass the test. You move on. It’s not like she has it now (Ms. McDonnagh, high school assistant principal).

Withdrawing Students from School

Participants discussed withdrawing students while commenting on the process of intervention with students who are refusing to attend school. This is referred to as “taking them off the rolls,” “withdrawing,” or “pushing out.” This was an issue discussed by high school personnel, especially assistant principals, who are responsible for this process. Students must be 16 years of age and have anywhere from five or more absences,
although this varied across participants. Some participants indicated absences must be unexcused, while others reported it did not matter. The process of withdrawing students includes telephone contact, a certified letter, and if no reply, withdrawal of the student. Some students are reportedly offered options such as GED programs, adult school, or night classes. One participant indicated that withdrawals such as this, that are considered automatic, are only to be done in cases referred to as “whereabouts unknown.” This is when the school is unable to locate a student, after phone calls and home visits.

The school system is not very sympathetic toward people who are chronically absent after the age of 16. In other words, if they have five or more absences they are automatically taken off the roles. If you have a student that’s having problems or doesn’t have a good support system at home then they’re taken off the roles (Mr. Claire, high school psychologist).

Participants provided both the positive and negative results related to withdrawing a student. Positive results primarily favored the school, as withdrawal is viewed as a solution for dealing with students who have poor attendance and academic records.

High schools in particular just withdraw if you’re not going to come, because there are a lot of external pressures, political, from the nature, financial, attendance is a big thing. You know, the legislature threatens to control how much you get, or cut your money back if you don’t have 95 or 96 percent so, you know, the easy answer there: have ‘em withdraw. With all the kids, that’s not a cure. They got your numbers back in line, but it didn’t do anything for the individual children who are missing or not coming. But that’s you know, it’s just like the testing. Teachers want to drill… it’s the driving force in ignoring the individuals’ problems and why he’s not coming. It’s easier to withdraw him. And that’s a big danger (Ms. Stein, district level).

Negative results affected the students. Many participants believe withdrawn students will have trouble in the world outside of school. GED programs, adult school, and alternative programs were described as having higher standards and requiring more
discipline on the student’s behalf. Some personnel indicated that a GED does not provide the same opportunities for students. A few participants expressed disapproval over the practice of withdrawing students. One participant indicated, “I think we owe it to them, even though it is a struggle and even though it affects our attendance and all that B.S. about the testing and stuff, I just don’t think we can cut them loose” (Ms. Hanson, high school teacher).

Recommendations for Schools from Schools

At the end of each interview, participants were provided with the opportunity to highlight, recommend, or emphasize some aspect of attendance issues and school refusal. Often throughout the course of the interview, participants would offer recommendations without prompting. Several key themes emerged from this process representing participants’ key concerns and recommendations. Their comments in general were broad, with few comments specific to school refusal, but overall directed towards problematic attendance issues. Recommendations focused on the school setting, the role of personnel, working with students, and involving parents in the process of intervening.

The School Setting

Recommendations for the school setting included ensuring the school is a safe haven, and that all students feel welcomed, nurtured, and comfortable in this place. Several participants expressed the need for incentives to keep kids coming to school. Others mentioned that there has to be educational alternatives such as career or vocational centers. A few participants expressed that attendance issues would always a problem and there is no fix or solution.
The role of school personnel was highlighted, especially the importance of non-instructional personnel, as they often are able to do more investigation into the reasons why students are refusing school. Recommendations included the need for attendance teams to monitor students consistently, as early intervention is viewed as the key to making a difference in absenteeism. The following participant provided an example of why early intervention is so imperative:

One more thing I wanted to add, we really need to work to identify kids much earlier than we do with this issue of attendance. I’ve had some of these cases, or had some of these cases been caught in elementary school we would end up with different outcomes…when you look at these kids in high school and you look back at the record, there is something happening, that they’re being missed. In elementary school, they’re missing 30 to 40 days a year and falling through the cracks somehow until it shows up as a high school problem or a middle school problem and then the consequences are much different. For example, getting withdrawn from school (Mr. Clark, high school social worker).

*Working with Students Who Refuse School*

Many personnel see absenteeism as the main indicator of any type of school refusal. They also consider it the “tip of the iceberg” for other issues students might be experiencing. Participants reported that students who are refusing school are obvious because of their attendance patterns. A few participants expressed that quiet, uninvolved students are less likely to show signs, and therefore may go unnoticed. Most participants reported that regardless of the reason for the refusal, working with students was imperative. The two predominant themes that participants emphasized included approaching each student individually and holistically, and to maintain an open mind when interacting with them.
A holistic view of the child was emphasized as the best way to approach attendance issues. Included in this was to acknowledge that reasons for school refusal are not universal and they often vary by age level. One participant, Mr. Hoeman, a middle school assistant principal, stated, “We can’t stop looking at these students as whole beings. We can’t just put our focus on them academically.” It is essential to investigate the “why” or the motivation behind the refusal before making decisions, as Ms. Hanson, a high school teacher described it, “I just think we really need to be patient and empathetic and to try to understand what’s going on with them in order to help them. I just… I would hate to see just because they’re absent a lot or just because they’re having difficulty attending that we just without digging deeper, cut them loose, you know?” Participants indicated there is no panacea for school refusal, and blanket policies or statements of how to fix such issues should be avoided.

When working directly with students who are refusing school, personnel provided tips for interacting with them. A major point made was never judge a student or their situation before listening to them and gathering the facts. Many of the student support personnel emphasized the need to “pay attention,” be patient, and listen to them.

Nurses cited that being “perceptive” and knowing how to separate students based on their issues was critical. Assistant principals stressed consistency in how one treats students and to avoid labels. They also believed that offering options to traditional day school were important, although some did cite a tendency to push students into other non-traditional routes once they turn sixteen. Compassion was considered important in the manner in which school personnel communicate with students, especially for disciplinary personnel. As one participant, Mr. Blane, a middle school assistant principal, put it, “…if
you don’t come across as being a compassionate person, you’re only, like I said before, you’re only pushing ‘em out a door they’re already halfway through.”

The Role of Parents

The role of parents repeatedly emerged as essential to the intervention process, as it did within various contexts of these results. Personnel believed parents must be involved as a part of the solution. However, participants indicated that they must keep an open mind and compassionate stance when working with parents, as many parents themselves have had negative school experiences, and this can affect their perception of school personnel. Participants had the perspective that parents of students who refuse school for various reasons do not value education. They related this to parents enabling behaviors like school refusal, because to them it is not a valuable experience. Personnel emphasized that they must be cognizant of this when communicating with parents.

School personnel stressed the importance of collaborating with parents on plans to get the student to school so there is both support from home as well as parental responsibility. Only one participant countered views related to sole parental responsibility, stating the following:

I think that any one that would say it’s all on the parent to get the kid to school is really naïve, because the school does have to do their part in wanting the kids to come. And that includes, you know, the teacher and the culture that’s developed there and kids feeling safe, wanting to come to school, and knowing there’s a nurturing environment, 'cause we’re all very important. So I think to me the school has a role, has a responsibility, you know, that the people at the school, you know, they have to show they care. Kids know that. They just … they perceive whether you care or not. And then of course you get the parents who definitely have to be involved in being parents, making sure their kids are coming to school. It’s the law but also it’s the right thing to do. So I think that in looking at attendance, both sides, you can’t blame one or blame the other. They basically have to work together and cooperate, you know. So that to me … and you know I’ve done … I’ve read articles on, you know, parent involvement and sometimes
schools, you know, answer questions no one’s asked ‘em, you know? You have to get the parents, where they’re at, making it convenient, especially now in 2005, you know, Internet, emails are read real frequent, you know, communications with parents more so, voice mail, so there’s things that we can do now that we maybe weren’t able to do a while back (Ms. Johnson, middle school assistant principal).

Results from the Survey of School Refusal

This section provides an overview of the results from the Survey of School Refusal. This survey was used to gather descriptive data regarding the approaches taken by schools when responding to students exhibiting school refusal, in addition to providing characteristics of school refusal in Shermer County middle and high schools. Participants included middle and high school principals, who gathered information regarding school refusal based on their data from the 2003-2004 academic school year. School refusal, for the purposes of this survey, was defined as “students who refuse to attend school” and “have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day.” This definition was provided to respondents on the survey to provide a common definition for their data gathering efforts. Within the survey questions, the term “excessive absences without a justifiable medical reason” operationalized the concept of school refusers.

Sixty-two surveys were mailed out. The overall response rate was 61%. Out of 39 middle schools and 23 high schools, response rates were 67% and 52%, respectively. Five surveys (three middle schools and two high schools) were excluded from the final analysis due to extensive missing data.
School Demographics

The majority of schools described themselves as being located in a suburban or urban setting, with all responding high schools and over 90% of middle schools classifying themselves as such (see Table 5).

Table 5. School Level and Geographic Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2 (8.7)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>2 (6.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>11 (47.8)</td>
<td>6 (60.0)</td>
<td>17 (51.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10 (43.5)</td>
<td>4 (40.0)</td>
<td>14 (42.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student population. Schools reported an average student population of 1,359 students, ranging from 615 to 2,727. Responding high schools reported 2,143 students on average, approximately twice the population of middle schools, whose mean student population was 1,019.

Identification and Response to School Refusal

System of identification. All respondents indicated their schools had a system in place for identifying students who have problems with excessive absenteeism. Although all schools indicated the presence of some form of a system, there were inconsistencies in the descriptions that were provided. Descriptions of this system ranged from general references to a “school wide attendance plan that is aligned with the school district’s attendance procedures” to more detailed procedures that involve attendance reports, telephone calls, and a specific series of steps to follow.
The majority of schools referred to a daily attendance bulletin or report that listed students with excessive absences. What varied in their descriptions of the daily absentee report was the person responsible for reviewing these reports and the actions taken following review of the report. Personnel responsible for reviewing the absentee report included principals, assistant principals, social workers, and classroom teachers. Various actions to be taken based on the attendance reports were described but varied extensively from school to school. Some responses included calling the parents, referring the student to the social worker, and generating letters to send home.

Schools also had varying criteria for defining the “excessively absent” student, which constitutes the basis for identifying school refusers. The number of absences considered excessive included five, six, ten, and twelve days of absences. Table 6 presents the mean number of annual absences that schools identified as being excessive, specifically those for which students lacked a justifiable medical reason. The definition of an excessively absent student varied considerably between middle and high schools. Middle schools, on average, considered a student excessively absent after 12 days, which would be well within the “normal” limits of the average high school. In these high schools, it was only after 20 absences that a student would be deemed excessively absent.

Table 6. Number of Absences Considered as Excessive Absenteeism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Middle Schools (23)</th>
<th>High Schools (10)</th>
<th>Overall (33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>8-24</td>
<td>10-40</td>
<td>8-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Personnel

Information regarding the staff person responsible for identifying school refusers is presented in Table 7. Across all schools, assistant principals were the most frequently reported persons responsible for identifying school refusers. This was largely driven by high schools, where assistant principals were listed as the person responsible in nearly all schools. In contrast, guidance counselors were most frequently reported as identifying school refusal in the middle schools, with assistant principals, social workers, and teachers a distant second. Overall, a team approach was the least likely method of identification.

Table 7. Personnel Responsible for Identifying School Refusers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier of School Refusers</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>5 (21.7)</td>
<td>9 (90.0)</td>
<td>14 (42.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>9 (39.1)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>9 (27.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>5 (21.7)</td>
<td>1 (10.0)</td>
<td>6 (19.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>5 (21.7)</td>
<td>1 (10.0)</td>
<td>6 (18.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>4 (17.4)</td>
<td>1 (10.0)</td>
<td>5 (15.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Clerk</td>
<td>3 (13.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>3 (9.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team of Personnel</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>1 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A school could have listed more than one person responsible for identifying school refusers, thus column numbers will not add up to the total number of responding schools nor will column percentages add up to 100%.

All schools reported having a full-time school psychologist on staff. Overall, school psychologists were assigned to two schools, and spent approximately two full (8-hour) days a week in each school setting. These averages were consistent across school levels, however, psychologists tended to spend slightly more hours a week at high schools than middle schools.
School refusers. The number of students evidencing school refusal as identified by excessive absenteeism in the 2003-2004 school year are presented in Table 8. The criterion for determining excessive absenteeism was discussed earlier (see Table 6). Both rural schools and schools at the high school level reported higher percentages of school refusers.

Table 8. School Population and Identified School Refusers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>School Refusers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>23,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>21,425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>25,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>16,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>44,853</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characteristics of school refusal. Respondents were asked to report the percent of school refusers that presented with somatic complaints in the absence and presence of a confirmed medical condition. These data are presented in Table 9. Overall, of the identified school refusers, 44% presented with somatic complaints in the absence of a confirmed medical condition, whereas 32% exhibited somatic complaints with an existing medical condition. Middle schools reported a higher percentage of school refusers exhibiting somatic complaints in the absence of a medical condition than high schools.

For both middle and high schools, the opportunity to engage in more enjoyable activities was reported as the most frequent reason for school refusal (21.9%). The need
to serve as a caregiver (12.6%) and the presence of depression or emotional problems (12.3%) were also frequently reported reasons for students to refuse school.

Table 9. School Refusers: Complaints & Reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Students Refusing School</strong>*</td>
<td>(1,705)</td>
<td>(2,853)</td>
<td>(4,558)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic Complaints:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of medical condition</td>
<td>1,147 (67.3)</td>
<td>865 (30.3)</td>
<td>2,012 (44.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of medical condition</td>
<td>220 (12.9)</td>
<td>1,253 (43.9)</td>
<td>1,473 (32.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Students Refusing School</strong></td>
<td>(1,989)</td>
<td>(2,853)</td>
<td>(4,842)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for school refusal:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in more enjoyable activities</td>
<td>429 (21.6)</td>
<td>630 (22.1)</td>
<td>105 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving as caregiver</td>
<td>207 (10.4)</td>
<td>402 (14.1)</td>
<td>609 (12.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression/emotional problem</td>
<td>262 (13.2)</td>
<td>332 (11.6)</td>
<td>594 (12.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear/anxiety of social situations at school</td>
<td>200 (10.1)</td>
<td>142 (5.0)</td>
<td>342 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear/anxiety of specific object/situation at school</td>
<td>91 (4.6)</td>
<td>168 (5.9)</td>
<td>259 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative/performance anxiety</td>
<td>63 (3.2)</td>
<td>154 (5.4)</td>
<td>217 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym Class</td>
<td>16 (0.8)</td>
<td>154 (5.4)</td>
<td>170 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to stay with caregiver</td>
<td>63 (3.2)</td>
<td>95 (3.3)</td>
<td>158 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Complete responses for 22 out of 23 middle and 8 out of 10 high schools. **Complete responses for all middle schools, but only 8 out of 10 high schools.

The School Response to School Refusal

Overall, schools reported confronting students in 75.2% of school refusal cases and notifying parents in 93.7% of cases (Table 10). Schools reported scheduling meetings most frequently with parents (58.5%) and least frequently between the student and the school psychologist (30.2%). For both middle and high schools, in nearly every case, the first step taken is either student confrontation or parental notification. Meetings between parents, teachers, students, and or guidance counselors are the intermediary steps, with other actions being taken at a later point in time.
Table 10. Actions Taken With Students Identified as School Refusers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Middle School Percent</th>
<th>High School Percent</th>
<th>Overall Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student is confronted</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent is notified</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>93.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting Scheduled:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Teacher</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Counselor/Student</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist/Student</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Complete responses for 17 out of 23 middle and 8 out of 10 high schools

Referrals appeared to be an important piece of the schools’ response to school refusal. Referrals were reported to be made most frequently to the school social worker (19.6%) and least frequently to a psychiatrist (0.7%) (Table 11). In high schools, physicians and mental health counselors were also key points of student referral.

Table 11. Referrals Made for Students Identified as School Refusers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Students Refusing School</strong></td>
<td>(1,989)</td>
<td>(2,893)</td>
<td>(4,882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referral Made To:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court referral</td>
<td>134 (6.7)</td>
<td>99 (3.4)</td>
<td>233 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Counselor</td>
<td>72 (3.6)</td>
<td>390 (13.5)</td>
<td>462 (9.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>132 (6.6)</td>
<td>545 (18.8)</td>
<td>677 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
<td>10 (0.5)</td>
<td>23 (0.8)</td>
<td>33 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>22 (1.1)</td>
<td>113 (3.9)</td>
<td>135 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>538 (27.0)</td>
<td>421 (14.6)</td>
<td>959 (19.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 31 of 33 responding schools provided descriptions of interventions used in cases of school refusal. The majority of these comments focused on individual counseling for the student, typically with the guidance counselor, social worker, and school psychologist. Student contracts were described as a tool or an agreement that some
personnel use to work with the student. Often these had incentives attached to meeting specified goals in achieving regular attendance. A few respondents described school-wide incentive based approaches.

Some schools described disciplinary approaches, and these were usually assigned to the student by the assistant principal. These mainly included detention or suspension. The process of telephone calls to parents, letters, and parent conferences were described.

Summary of Results

The findings from this exploratory qualitative study tell the story of school personnel and their construction of school refusal. The use of a social constructionist framework provides insight into school personnel’s constructions of school refusal, how personnel arrive at them, and their influence on practical experiences with students. This study establishes that school personnel rarely use the terminology set forth by professional literature. School refusal, along with other attendance issues is conceptualized within a larger framework of absenteeism that provides a frame of reference for school personnel. Personnel delineate attendance issues into problematic and non-problematic categories, focusing primarily on problematic issues. The role of the personnel, specifically whether or not they are discipline focused, tends to influence perceptions further. Judgments about the legitimacy of the reason for absenteeism also influence personnel’s level of empathy for students.

Personnel constructed absenteeism from a social structure diagnostic frame, focusing on school environment and culture, family dynamics, poverty, and culture, and an individual diagnostic frame, focusing on the individual student and their family. Explanatory models for absenteeism centered on barriers, specifically those physical,
mental, emotional, social, and societal in nature. Many participants focused on the motivating factors for refusal, differentiating various categories of students.

Personnel perceived the student experience of refusal as being driven by internal or external forces. Parents were viewed as a cause, enabling factor, or an influence on student’s refusal behavior. If a student who refused school was from a low-income family, there was an overt perception that the family does not value education. The major finding that emerged was that despite personnel’s statements that any student could refuse school, their construction revealed specific attributes. Nine typifications of students, or collective descriptions, emerged from school personnel’s stories and included the following: the defiant student, the adult student, the failing student, the bored student, the invisible student, the physically refusing student, the socially uncomfortable student, the sick student, and the victim. The overarching dynamics of these typifications included parental control, parental awareness, student locus of control, blame, and victim status.

In terms of identifying students who refuse school, the most important indicator was their attendance record. Personnel do not explore reasons in depth until a pattern has formed. The intervention process for any attendance issue consists of a series of formal telephone calls, letters, and meetings, all tracked on an intervention form. This represents the formal process of dealing with problematic absenteeism, and there is no other formal process for specific types of absenteeism, such as school refusal. The major deviation from this process was the decision of whether to refer a student to support services or student affairs.

The constructions of the consequences of school refusal included immediate outcomes, such as school failure to long-term outcomes, like increased welfare costs.
Programs to target and prevent the negative outcomes personnel associated with school refusal included at-risk programs and incentive programs. There was a lack of programs that aim at early intervention or prevention of school refusal.

Survey results revealed that all schools have a system in place for identifying students who have problems with excessive absenteeism. Schools also had varying criteria for defining the “excessively absent” student, which constitutes the basis for identifying school refusers. The most frequently reported reason for refusing school was to engage in more enjoyable activities. In high schools, assistant principals were predominantly responsible for identifying school refusal, while at middle schools it was the responsibility of the guidance counselors. Team approaches that were a common method of response according to interviews were the least frequent method among survey respondents.
CHAPTER V:
CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This final chapter consists of five sections. The first section provides a brief summary of the study background, purpose, and methodology. The second section provides a detailed discussion of the key findings. This discussion highlights: (1) the language of attendance issues and school refusal; (2) the general constructions of school attendance issues; (3) descriptions of school refusal as a behavior; (4) deconstructing school personnel’s stories of school refusal; (5) influences on school personnel and their understanding of school refusal; (6) identification and intervention; (7) school personnel’s perceived outcomes; (8) recommendations; and (9) the findings of the Survey of School Refusal. The third and fourth sections present the limitations and strengths of the study, respectively. The final section examines the implications of the findings and provides recommendations for education, public health, school health, and future research.

Study Summary

Study Background

School refusal has long been an issue studied within a myriad of professional disciplines, but has only recently come under the purview of public health and school health. Likewise, there is conflict within the literature over the language used to describe
school refusal. Most research has studied school refusal as a problem of the student and the dynamics of the students’ families, rather than studying the social or cultural context in which it occurs. Schools are cited as playing a major role in the identification of students who refuse, however, little is known about how school personnel perceive school refusal and the students who experience it. The social constructionist perspective provides a unique alternative for exploring how school personnel perceive school refusal and its construction within the school setting that lead to those perceptions. This study also focused on understanding the social interactions and processes that influence school personnel perceptions.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to describe school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal. Likewise, this study explores the ways in which these perceptions influence the methods and strategies utilized by individual schools and their district to prevent, identify, and manage youth identified as refusing school specifically in the School District of Shermer County. This study has four main questions:

1. How do school personnel construct their perceptions of school refusal?
2. What are school personnel’s reported perceptions, explanations, and beliefs related to school refusal?
3. How do school personnel perceive students they identify as experiencing school refusal?
4. What are the consequences of their perceptions for the recognition of school refusal among students?
Methods

Through a purposeful, random sample of middle and high schools located in the School District of Shermer County, ten schools were invited to participate in this study. Observations were conducted within each selected school setting. Within each school, personnel within the categories of administration, support services, and school health were invited to participate in individual interviews. Following informed consent, individual interviews were conducted with 82 participants.

Prior to the school level interviews, ten interviews were conducted with personnel at the district level within the administration areas of each of the previously mentioned categories of personnel. A total sample was attempted, but not achieved. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data were entered into Ethnograph 5.0 and coded. Analysis of the interview data was based on the examination of reoccurring themes that emerged.

Finally, a descriptive survey, the Survey of School Refusal, was sent to all middle and high schools within the county. Thirty-eight out of 68 surveys were returned. Univariate and bivariate statistical procedures were conducted using SAS version 9.1.3 to describe survey results.

Key Findings

There were many important findings within this study, however it is essential to begin with the overarching outcomes that appear to be crucial to all research related to school attendance. These two major outcomes focus on the language used to describe attendance and general constructions of school attendance issues.
The Language of Attendance Issues and School Refusal

The language school personnel used to discuss attendance did not incorporate an all-encompassing term, specifically not those used within the professional literature. The terminology used when referring to students who refuse school or who have attendance issues was inconsistent across categories of personnel. Terms like absenteeism, attendance issues, truants, and chronic non-attenders are used frequently but without reference to the motivating factors for the behaviors of non-attendance. This study establishes that school personnel do not use a common language when describing students who have attendance issues or refuse to attend school.

Despite the use of terms like attendance issues, truancy, or absenteeism, school personnel do not have a lexicon for school refusal. Participants who used terminology reflective of the professional literature had specialized graduate-level educational training. It is notable that despite knowledge of the language used within research on school refusal, participants rarely used it in a practical or applied manner in the school.

A major area of contention that has plagued school refusal research is the lack of consensus and disarray of the language used to describe this phenomenon (Chiland & Young, 1990; Kahn, Nursten, & Carroll, 1981; Kearney, 2001, 2003). Likewise, there is an obvious lack of understanding of how school refusal research and its set of terminology have translated into the applied world of the school setting. This study establishes that there is little usage of the professional literature on school refusal within the school setting. Most participants were not familiar with any of the terms that have been used in school refusal research, including school refusal, school phobia, or other
attendance related terminology. However, participants were willing to provide definitions for these terms when asked about them.

Participants were able to differentiate between conceptualizations of school refusal, school phobia, and separation anxiety, which are also reflective of the research. Such delineations focused on nuances of behavior, grade level, and willfulness of the student. All participants were familiar with general absenteeism. It was often described negatively, and occurring in patterns. School refusal was less familiar and described as a willful behavior of students. Only a few participants, mainly social workers and psychologists, separated school refusal into further types of attendance problems, like school phobia. School phobia was the most familiar term to school personnel. It was viewed as a fear of one or many aspects of school.

While many participants indicated they try to avoid using terms or predefined labels, many would provide and use various terms while providing descriptions of students and their behavior. The most commonly used term was truant, as well as school phobic, non-attender, frequent flier, skipper, and chronic absentee. Assistant principals were more likely to use truant or skipper, guidance counselors’ school phobic, and nurses’ frequent flier. This is reflective of Loseke’s (2003) view that our reality is often shaped by our personal experiences. Participants in this study primarily conceptualized school refusal and other attendance issues according to their own real, everyday experiences with students, and not according to any diagnostic criteria or by any predetermined set of rules for identification. However, this study does reveal that the practical categorizations of students described by school personnel are in line with the
The term school refusal is increasingly accepted within the professional literature in various disciplines, yet few participants used it in this study (Chiland & Young, 1990; Kahn et al., 1981; Kearney, 2003). Those that did were mainly school psychologists or social workers with post-baccalaureate training. School psychologists, similar to researchers on school refusal, were the personnel most specific in their definition and delineations of school refusal from other forms of attendance issues (Torrens Salemi, 2004).

Despite the lack of terminology and limited use of school refusal, the understanding of the term can be examined from a social constructionist perspective. Social constructionism posits that reality is created through our daily interactions with other people as is language created and re-created through these interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Despite schools having some personnel who are aware of the term school refusal and its conceptualization, these personnel are limited in their interactions with other school personnel. School psychologists and social workers are mainly itinerate and spend a few hours each week at multiple schools, therefore the limited contact they share with other personnel limits any influence on the language of others.

This study suggests the need for appropriate dissemination of research related to school refusal. Additionally, there is a tendency for most research related to absenteeism to focus on truancy and dropout, although there is an obvious awareness of other forms of absenteeism. The findings in this study underscore the need to develop an
interdisciplinary approach to school refusal that incorporates all areas of research on absenteeism, as opposed to further delineating each “type” of attendance issue.

These findings also raise methodological issues. In studies of school refusal, depending on the terminology and definitions used, the validity of prevalence measures must be called into question. The most likely problem is that such studies have underestimated the prevalence of school refusal. As Loseke (2003) explains, the number of people harmed by a particular social problem, in this case school refusal, depend on how the parameters are constructed and how harm caused by it is defined. One example is Fox’s (1995) study that examined different school personnel’s views on student absenteeism due to increased home responsibilities (such as caregiving). He concluded that because there was a lack of a “master discourse” among personnel on absenteeism related to home responsibilities, that this particular form of absenteeism has not be constructed as a social problem. Given the findings in this study, if school refusal is used, even with a provided definition, it is limiting.

This may indicate the need to expand beyond narrowly defined types of absenteeism to examine broader perspective to gain a true understanding of the master discourse of all attendance issues. It would be beneficial to provide a more inclusive list of behaviors and examples that personnel in schools can identify with, and therefore more accurately assess the students affected. This might be through claims-making strategies, such as piggy-backing or domain expansion (Loseke, 2003). For example, if school refusal were constructed as a different instance of truancy, this would be considered piggybacking. If truancy, which has long been characterized as a social problem, were expanded conceptually to include school refusal, this would be domain expansion. This
study fills this gap by developing an array of behaviors, descriptions, and terminology that are conceptualized and used within the school setting that might be helpful in future claims-making strategies.

**General Constructions of School Attendance Issues**

First, it is evident that within the school setting, all attendance issues, including school refusal, are couched within the larger umbrella of absenteeism. This study clearly establishes that personnel have well-defined perceptions and understandings of school attendance problems such as absenteeism and these perceptions form a major part of their frame of reference for all related issues. Interpreting this within a social constructionist perspective, this frame of reference might serve as the “formula story” for the social problem of school refusal (Loseke, 2003, p. 89). Loseke asserts that a formula story is a general type of story that consists of narratives about types of experiences involving distinct characters. The formula story is described as narrow, only including the elements that construct the condition and the harm caused by it (Loseke, 2003). Within the absenteeism formula story, the condition is problematic absenteeism, which is discussed below. The harm is the negative outcomes associated with problematic absenteeism, which are discussed later. Likewise, the story also contains notions of causes and effects, which are discussed throughout these key findings.

School personnel clearly delineate attendance issues into problematic and non-problematic absenteeism. This was the case for the majority of the participants and few differences emerged across categories of personnel or grade level. The most apparent difference was between discipline-focused personnel, such as assistant principals and school resource officers and those focused on student support. Discipline focused
personnel often viewed absenteeism as a truancy issue, although many also acknowledged other explanations. These views of absenteeism substantiate Loseke’s (2003) assertion that while practical experiences tend to be shared by members of the same social category, in this instance school personnel, it cannot be assumed that all school personnel draw from this same practical experience (i.e., assistant principals).

While personnel articulated the many reasons for absenteeism, emphasis was placed on problematic absenteeism. School personnel tolerate non-problematic absenteeism specifically when it is due to reasons they consider as legitimate. Much of the literature on absenteeism cites “legitimate” explanations (i.e., chronic illness or regularly occurring illness) for absenteeism that are considered acceptable (Kearney, 2001; Young, Chiland, & Kaplan, 1990). However, some of the same reasons are considered non-legitimate, and are cited as reasons of problematic absenteeism as well. This is congruent with common conceptualizations of school absenteeism. School absenteeism has been constructed and accepted across cultures as a type of problem or syndrome that involves absenteeism as the primary symptom of a myriad of other problems such as learning problems, truancy or depression (Kearney, 2001; Young et al., 1990). Reasons were often delineated by this dynamic of legitimacy, and seemed to affect the level of empathy for students with absenteeism. This was particularly the case for specific explanations for absenteeism such as bullying, school transitions, illness, and grade level. Legitimate reasons were often described as occurring when the situation was out of the student’s control and how they personally related to the situation. These findings reveal that personnel categorize students in various manners. This supports the
social constructionist assertion that it is natural for humans to categorize as a way of
dealing with the complexity of life (Goffman, 1963; Loseke, 2003).

The role of the school was cited as playing a supporting role in absenteeism. Although this was not a main reason, participants did highlight that schools have a responsibility to make school a place where students want to be. Low school connectedness, social climate, and a heavy academic and testing focus were considered aspects of schooling that make attending and remaining in school difficult for some students. Much of the literature cites a lack of focus on the school setting as playing a supporting role in school refusal and problematic absenteeism, thus the fact that personnel acknowledged the role of the school was a surprising explanation (Brulle & McIntyre, 1985; Elliott, 1999; King & Bernstein, 2001; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

An overwhelming proportion of participants viewed family as having a major influence on attendance issues. Family dynamics have been discussed as having a clear influence on attendance issues and school refusal (Bernstein, Svingen, & Garfinkel, 1990; Kearney & Silverman, 1995). Home life, parents’ own educational experience, and parenting skills were all noted as major aspects of the family that impact absenteeism among students. Socio-economic status and culture served as underlying themes within these explanations for absenteeism. Personnel described families that are poor, minority, or lacking a high school education as not valuing education and thus school attendance is not important. This finding suggests that personnel may have arrived at this explanation from encountering a larger segment of students from lower socio-economic populations; however, it still reveals that assumptions are made regarding family value systems of the absentee student.
The above-mentioned explanations for absenteeism, from a constructionist perspective, might be interpreted as diagnostic frames. Diagnostic frames are described by Loseke (2003) when a social condition is constructed in a way that constructs blame and responsibility. Diagnostic frames can be constructed as social causes of a condition, such as social structure (i.e., blaming the various aspects of schooling mentioned earlier, family dynamics, or poverty), or social forces (blaming competing activities, differential treatment of students). Diagnostic frames may also be constructed as a part of the individual, which is seen in participants’ explanations for absenteeism below (blaming the student or the family). Hoyle (1998) outlined four constructions of absenteeism within the British education system, which are reflective of the findings in this study, and included individual pathology, defective parenting, failure to identify and meet the needs of the student, and factors within the process of schooling. Similarly, these constructions form diagnostic frames for the problem of absenteeism.

Participants constructed explanations for absenteeism as barriers, specifically physical, mental, emotional, social, and societal barriers. Barriers to attending school were different in that participants provided these as an explanation for what makes it actually difficult for some students to attend school. Barriers were described as internal and external to the student and their locus of control, and whether or not they are legitimate. Social barriers to attendance were the most prominent and focused on students’ who have a difficult time fitting within the existing social setting.

Explanations for why some students have a difficult time remaining in school for the entire day focused mainly on social issues that affect the student’s comfort level. Participants cited similar issues in terms of barriers; however, they did not focus on
families or parents. Issues such as perceived bullying and low school connectedness were more common.

Descriptions of School Refusal as a Behavior

Most of the participants in this study constructed school refusal as a behavior, although these constructions of behavior were often intertwined with descriptions of students as well. These constructions provide the dimensions that school personnel think about, talk about, and use when describing school refusal. Often, within their comments, they would delineate between various types of behavior, such as school phobia, defiant school refusal, and separation anxiety. This is contradictory to literature that suggests school personnel have a tendency to place all students exhibiting school refusal into one category (Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992).

Participants described that among middle and high school students, school absenteeism could lead to a cycle of school refusal. Additionally students in key transitional periods in their schooling were considered more likely to have problems attending school. Several differences between primary and secondary school refusal were described. First, secondary students were more likely to experience emotional issues that affect attendance behaviors. Secondly, primary students are less likely to be in control of the decision to come to school and parental responsibility was cited as the primary factor, whereas, secondary students are considered old enough to make the right decision (i.e., come to school).

These findings suggest that school personnel delineate not only by the explanation for the school refusal, but categorize their explanations by grade level. From a social constructionist perspective, this can be explained as emerging as a product of their
continued interactions with students in certain grade levels. Likewise, it also suggests the need for caution in avoiding preconceived notions according to grade level when identifying students who are refusing. From a constructionist perspective, this is important because as Loseke (2003) explains, categorizations are important because they can influence our behavior. The importance of this is that as practical actors categorize people, they include varying associations, evaluations, and reactions (Loseke, 2003).

School phobia was constructed as a fear related to being in or coming to school. It was described as a behavior primarily occurring among primary students or students at transitional periods in schooling. School phobia behavior was thought to result from real or imagined stimuli within the school environment, such as bullying. Several participants also described the role of parents in school phobia. Parents were described as being involved, if not over-involved, and having a difficult time separating from students who are displaying emotional distress. Participants described school phobia as causing students extreme anguish, emotionality, and somatic complaints. An interesting aspect of participants’ construction of school phobia is that many believe that its “true” occurrence is rare. Further, the idea of a true case is disconcerting as there were no consistent criteria among participants for deciding if a case is true or not, except for the diagnosis of school phobia.

Some participants described school phobia as a diagnosable condition, helping delineate true cases from those that are not. Despite the lack of existing diagnostic criteria within the medical field, participants described students who have been diagnosed as “school phobic” thus making them eligible for homebound education. Many participants acknowledged the use of hospital homebound but the majority disapproved. It was
described as only supporting the phobic behavior. This is in agreement with the literature on school refusal and school phobia that indicates removing the student from school can be detrimental (Jenni, 1997; Klein & Last, 1989). It is notable that the acceptance of diagnoses of school phobia may suggest that, to an extent, the medicalization of school phobia has occurred here as it has in Japan (Yamazaki, 1994).

Participants, mainly student support personnel, described the behavior of refusing school as a symptom of something else in a student’s life. From this perspective school refusal was constructed as a type of behavioral indicator. School nurses also highlighted this aspect of the “frequent flier,” or the student who continually visits the clinic with vague symptoms. The major finding from this aspect of school refusal was the importance of identifying the underlying cause of the problem. Only a few participants cautioned that school refusal might appear as a behavioral problem and the student ends up with a punishment, which could inadvertently encourage the behavior. This is reflective of research findings from a study that examined differential punishment among students by race and found that one group of students were punished at greater rates as a consequence of teachers’ perceptions of student behavior, their knowledge of academic performance, and their knowledge of past punishment (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). This underscores the need for careful identification and appropriate intervention in cases of school refusal of any type (Berry, 1993; Brand & O'Connor, 2004; Cooper & Mellors, 1990).

Student support personnel and teachers constructed illness as a reason, cause, and excuse for school refusal. Illness among students was categorized into legitimate and non-legitimate forms of illness. This finding paralleled the delineation of absenteeism
into problematic and non-problematic. There are important implications of this finding that refer back to the need for careful identification, screening, and appropriate intervention in school refusal. It also indicates the need for consistency between personnel within the school, especially with those involved in documenting student illness.

Student support personnel described mental illnesses and emotional issues as reasons that affect and cause school refusal. In the descriptions, participants generally referred to depression, anxiety, undiagnosed mental illness, and stress induced illness. Again, there were concerns that students who do not “appear” depressed, but show “problem” behaviors such as acting out, would be inappropriately punished.

Several participants, particularly district personnel, teachers, guidance counselors and social workers, described elements of the school environment that motivate or exacerbate school refusal behavior. Perceptions of safety, structural environment, school climate and culture, school connectedness, and academic pressure were all aspects of the school environment that were thought to influence school refusal behavior. This included the transitional periods students experience when moving between schools (i.e., from 5th grade to 6th grade, or 8th to 9th). Related to these transitions, participants cited differences between primary and secondary schools that affect students comfort level. Secondary schools were described as being colder, less caring, or nurturing than primary schools, a change that some students are sensitive to. There were also expectations of students to find their social niche on their own. If students do not have the social skills to do so, participants explained that they might end up avoiding school. The fact that participants highlighted these elements of the school environment draws attention to the need for
mechanisms to ease the transitions for students to avoid school refusal. These findings are consistent with studies on the effect of low levels of school connectedness and the increased risk of dropping out (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997).

**Describing the Student Who Refuses School**

When offering their description of students who refuse school, participants would frequently describe the perspective their comments were based on, such as their profession, their empathy for students, or their own personal life experiences. This was surprising, as it almost appeared as a self-evaluation of how they arrive at their own constructions of students who refuse school. Gergen (1985) described social constructionist inquiry as being concerned with “explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (p. 266). Burr (1995) would describe this as taking a critical stance of the “taken-for-granted” ways of understanding the everyday lives of school personnel. The processes that unfolded within the interviews allowed insight into what influences school personnel’s constructions of school refusal, from their own point of view. It suggests that a person’s role in the school, their empathy, or ability to relate to a student’s situation, and their own past personal experiences influence their perception of students who refuse.

When describing their perceptions of students who refuse school, participants differentiated students as having internal or external experiences. Internal experiences included various emotions, perceptions, and thoughts students might have. Fear was closely associated with school phobia, whereas frustration was linked to refusal due to academic or social failure. External experiences that were used to explain school refusal
included expectations placed on students (or lack of), distractions, and social issues (i.e., bullying, social discomfort).

Similar to perceptions of general absenteeism, parents were constructed as a cause, an enabling factor, or an influence (through their attitudes on education) on school refusal. In some descriptions, personnel blamed parents (and not students) for forcing students to stay home to play the role of translator, caregiver, or wage earner. This was particularly an issue in schools with high migrant populations. In most cases, this was viewed as a negative practice. This may be due to cultural themes in Western society about children’s role in society, which indicates it should primarily consist of attending school, thus keeping them home prevents them from attaining future success, thus does harm (Best, 1994; Young et al., 1990). Likewise, this negative view of parents who do not force their children to attend school may also be explained by what Loseke (2003) refers to as “cultural feeling rules” which she defines as widely held beliefs about how we should feel about particular types of people. This includes the notion of who deserves sympathy and help and who deserves condemnation and punishment. This is illustrated by the contrasting sympathy for parents who had “lost control” of the child who was refusing school, and therefore not blamed, as they did not intentionally cause harm.

Participants, mainly middle school personnel, frequently highlighted attributes of students who refuse school, but only after indicating that such students “could look like anybody.” However, within their stories of students, details often included gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and demeanor. Males and females were discussed equally, although there was often discussion about professional opinions, differences by grade level, or what the motivating factor for the refusal was.
While some participants indicated ethnicity was not a characteristic, some described more Caucasian students while others specified Hispanic females in instances of students being forced to stay home. Socio-economic status was most often mentioned as a characteristic by participants from schools with a higher percentage of students from lower income households. Participants often linked socio-economic status to a decreased value placed on education. This may suggest that this particular perception is a product of repeated interactions with this particular segment of students and their families. However, it also implies personnel make assumptions based on socio-economic status.

An unexpected description of students that emerged regarded their perception of reality. Participants speculated about student’s true experience when refusing school and whether it was based on real or perceived issues, for example bullying or anxiety. This reveals participants own evaluation of their interactions with students. This might be interpreted as their way of deciding what fits their own reality of what is or is not legitimate as an explanation of refusal.

These findings suggest that despite participants’ statements that “any student” could refuse school, their construction of students reveal specific attributes. This supports the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, in that their perceptions of the reality of school refusal have developed from their continued social interactions with students. It also highlights the potential for personnel to overlook students who do not fit within their accepted descriptions of who refuses school, which illustrates potential for negative consequences of categorizing students.
Deconstructing School Personnel’s Stories of School Refusal

School personnel shared countless stories of their experiences with students who refuse to attend school. These stories, when examined, provided insight into their perceptions and experiences with these students as well as the processes of identification and intervention. A major aspect of the identification process appeared to be how personnel differentiate students. Students who refuse school are mainly identified by a lack of attendance, and whether or not the absences are excused was important. Although some participants indicated that excused absences, if excessive, would be investigated, such a differentiation has implications. It is reasonable to assume that it may take longer for a student who is being excused to be identified as having an actual “problem” with attending school. School refusal was also differentiated by reasons for refusal and grade level.

Several key factors appeared to affect personnel’s evaluation of their experiences with students who refuse school. These evaluations are important as they may have implications for personnel’s future interactions with students. With students, personnel emphasized individualized interactions, especially when trying to identify the reason for their refusal. Most personnel described having a positive rapport with students, although this depended on their role. Disciplinarians often described being viewed negatively by students. Personnel reflected on the role of other personnel in the school setting and their interactions with students. Teachers were perceived as highly frustrated. Guidance counselors and females were seen as particularly caring, whereas administrators were viewed as discipline focused. This was interesting in that many participants described the need for a team approach to intervene in cases of school refusal; however, the perceptions
described reflect individualized interactions between personnel and students. These perceptions should be considered when developing protocols for team interventions.

Participants evaluated parental involvement as critical to contributing to or hindering the resolution of school refusal. An appropriate balance of parental involvement, communication, and support from the school where the elements most needed, according to personnel, to assist the student in making a return to regular school attendance. Parents who were less involved, did not appear to value education, or were not willing to work with the school were viewed as impeding the school’s intervention. On the contrary, parents who were too involved were viewed as overbearing and personnel considered this unhealthy for the student.

Besides providing insight into identification and interventions, school personnel’s stories revealed that their constructions of students went beyond “any student.” Instead, their stories provided the basis for what became collective descriptions or images of students who refuse school. These categorizations or “typifications” are what Loseke (2003) describes as “images in our heads of typical kinds of things” (p.17). Such typifications and images serve as social resources that practical actors use to understand things they may not have personally experienced (Loseke, 2003). Likewise, these typifications become useful resources for personnel’s future interactions with students.

The overarching dynamics of these typifications included level of parental control, parental awareness, student locus of control, blame, and victim status. These are all elements that build the collective identities of images of students who refuse school. The construction of school refusal within the formula story of problematic absenteeism
concurrently creates these images of students that are “valued or devalued” (Loseke, 2003). Again, the notion of “cultural feeling rules” brings up issues of blame and responsibility, specifically the cultural theme of individual responsibility (Loseke, 2003). This speaks to the dynamics of parental control, parental awareness, and student locus of control, which might be viewed as a continuum of level of responsibility, and thus introducing the opportunity for blame. This also applies to the rules of victim status and the emotion of sympathy that people feel for victims (Loseke, 2003). Thus, if these dynamics truly reflect responsibility, it should follow that if a parent has low control, low or some awareness of the student refusing school, they are not “responsible” for the behavior and the blame would fall on the student. Within the typifications, personnel would categorize some students as victims, thus not responsible, and deserving sympathy. Students viewed as responsible for their refusal were blamed, therefore not deserving of sympathy. This may reflect the existence of stigma related school refusing behavior, or attributes of this behavior that make it undesirable (Luiz De Moura, 2002). The issues of blame is a common theme among child “problem” behaviors (Best, 1994; Luiz De Moura, 2002).

Overall, there were nine typifications of students including the defiant student, the adult student, the failing student, the bored student, the invisible student, the physically refusing student, the socially uncomfortable student, the sick student, and the victim. The descriptions of these students are provided in the results section, so a detailed description is not provided here. These typifications paralleled Best’s (1994) assertion that the social problems of children are constructed within four categories including the rebellious child, the deprived child, the sick child, and the child-victim.
The important implication of these typifications is that they represent those categorizations of the practical actors that work in school settings everyday. These categorizations influence how personnel react to students they encounter. Schneider and Ingram (1993) explain that such categorizations are normative and evaluative and often portray groups in positive or negative terms, and it is these groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy. Such categorizations help personnel decide who is deserving of help and who of punishment, therefore there are important implications for intervention and policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). School personnel’s categorizations emerged from various influences and thus the next section reviews the various influences on school personnel.

*Influences on School Personnel and their Understandings of School Refusal*

First, it is important to address what obviously does not influence school personnel and their understanding of school refusal. Foremost, existing literature and research on school refusal do not play a role in the understanding or perceptions of school personnel. Internal and external influences along with frustration from experiences were the major influences on personnel’s perceptions. District policies and politics predominantly influenced those personnel responsible for enforcing them, mainly assistant principals.

The two major internal influences were intuition and communication skills. Knowledge obtained from college training and ongoing education was not a major influence, except among personnel with higher-level training, such as psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors. This was also interpreted as an external influence that could affect their perception. Teamwork, which results in interactions
between school personnel, appeared to influence participants’ perceptions of students. This is important given inconsistencies in conceptualizations and identification of students by categories of personnel. Past experiences related to participants' own educational experience, as a parent, or previous experiences in the school also served as influences on personnel’s understandings. The latter, previous experiences, was a major influence that participants used to form the basis for future interactions.

Participants were eager to share their frustrations with students who refuse and how it influences their actions. Administrators are more likely frustrated by the affect school refusal has on attendance rates, whereas others were frustrated with the process of working with these students. The process, from the length of time involved to the amount of work targeting one student, leads to low motivation to work on this issue. This raises concerns about intentional lack of identification or deference to an easier solution (i.e., punishment).

Administrators’ frustration with the affect of school refusal on attendance rates is further exacerbated by the politics of attendance. Given the increased pressures on schools, administrators, and teachers to meet federal and state education standards, attendance is on the radar screen. Due to a relationship between attendance and school funding, many participants expressed concern that students’ who refuse to attend school are being systematically removed from school rolls, specifically if they are over the age of 16. This is not by any means a new phenomenon. Fine (1991) in her study of the politics of dropouts, discussed this process of removing students from rolls, and referred to it as discharge, pushout or coercive discharge. In her findings, such actions were taken regularly at the high school level due to similar reasons with funding. The issue that
arises in these findings is the current focus on accountability, forcing schools to pay
attention to attendance for the wrong reasons. Bowditch (1993) hypothesized that routine
disciplinary procedures such as the use of indicators to identify “troublemakers” are the
same indicators that place students “at-risk” of dropping out but instead of intervening,
such practices systematically exclude students, thus perpetuating racial and class
stratification. Given the identification issues related to school refusal and the practical
categorizations of school personnel, there is the potential for social and economic
injustice to result from such practices.

Identification and Intervention in School Refusal

There are several important findings related to the identification and intervention
of school refusal. This section will start by discussing the findings associated with
identification followed by those findings related to intervention.

One of the most important findings in terms of identification was that a student’s
attendance record is the primary indicator of a “problem” with absenteeism of any type.
This represents the only measurable attribute of absenteeism and is reflective of the
aforementioned conceptualizations of general attendance issues. The most apparent
problem with relying on attendance records is that it reveals little about the nature or
reason for the absence, relying on reliable, valid, and timely bookkeeping and review.

Reviews are usually the responsibility of the assistant principal in high schools
and guidance counselors in middle schools; however, it is not conducted on a daily basis.
Reviews were reported as being conducted every two to three weeks, reviewed for
patterns, such as consecutive days of absences or repeated absences on Mondays and
Fridays. While these reviews are important, it reveals a significant lapse in time between
the development of a pattern to identification. This could possibly account for the stories of students “falling through the cracks.” Additionally, an important finding was the lack of identification systems or processes in place. Only one middle school reported the use of a monitoring system, which relied on teachers tracking attendance for multiple classes and conducting follow-up on a daily basis for each absent student.

Part of the attendance record includes the delineation of excused versus unexcused absences. Participants reported that more emphasis is placed on unexcused absences, which presents the issue of students who might be refusing but go unrecognized if they present evidence for an excused absence. Further exploration of the problem does not occur until after the general identification has occurred, unless there are overt behaviors that are recognized such as crying or physical refusal. Participants expressed concerns related to dependence on such general indicators like attendance, emphasizing the need to explore each student’s educational history for patterns.

Many personnel are involved formally and informally in the identification of and intervention with students who refuse to attend school. This depended on their role in the school. Teachers were described as those most often to identify a student first and refer them on to other personnel. In this aspect, they serve a critical role as a gatekeeper to students accessing other personnel who might intervene. This finding underscores the need for teacher support and education on school refusal and identification, especially given the previously described frustrations teachers have with such students. School health personnel are also considered a frontline of identification, specifically for those students who repeatedly visit the school clinic.
It is noteworthy that the general process of intervention, as with identification, revolves around the measurable indicator of attendance. There are two levels of interventions with the first consisting of a school level protocol followed by the district level protocol. The main principal is that the process of intervention at the school level should be initiated for all students who are missing excessive days of school, regardless of motivation. Ideally, this protocol would “catch” all attendance related issues before they progress to chronic issues. The presence of the district level protocol appears counterintuitive to this, as it is primarily a process for chronic or severe attendance issues.

Although all of the intervention processes are relatively straightforward, they rely on the sole indicator of attendance, and therefore any exploration of reasons for the absenteeism are informal until it has progressed to the point of referral. A major finding was the deviations from the formal protocol described by participants. A major deviation occurred when participants indicated they were aware of the reason for absences, specifically bullying, illness, students as caregivers, lack of parental awareness, or emotional issues. Participants indicated they still took action; however, there was more flexibility in their responses. This highlights the impact school personnel’s perceptions had on their responses to students. Perhaps one of the most important deviations to highlight was a key decision personnel, mainly teachers, make in the referral process that diverts from the general protocol. This is the decision to refer students to student support services or student affairs. Teachers reported sending students with emotional, psychological, or behavioral issues related to their absences to student support services, who assume a problem solving position. Students with defiant behaviors related to absences are sent to student affairs, which takes a disciplinary approach. The differential
consequences of this decision reveal another manner in which personnel’s perceptions of students affect the intervention process. As Loseke (2003) points out, categorizations of practical actors can have very real implications and this finding validates this theoretical point.

Lastly, personnel described the intervention process as lengthy, inconsistent, and confusing. These major concerns center on the problem of overlooking early warning signs, missing students, and looking only at attendance. The majority of participants expressed that absenteeism is usually a sign or indicator of something larger, therefore more attention should go towards exploring the reasons behind it. This suggests a need for schools to re-visit their current protocols and make improvements. In the process of reviewing current identification and intervention protocols, it would behoove schools to include those personnel who most frequently identify students. These personnel and their practical experiences must be considered, but not relied upon, in the improvement of such protocols. Further, I emphasize the need to include the voices of students and parents themselves. They represent an unrepresented voice in the construction of issues of absenteeism and school refusal.

*Perceived Outcomes of School Refusal*

The perceptions of outcomes of school refusal reported by participants are important findings as they reflect the potential harm that results from students’ refusal to attend school. Loseke (2003) describes harm as the outcome created by the social condition. Likewise, participants’ claims construct the outcomes of school refusal as consequences that should not be tolerated within our society.
Most participants focused on overarching themes ranging from immediate individual outcomes like dropping out and school failure to long-term societal outcomes such as increased welfare costs, violence, poverty, mental health, and crime. There was a particularly narrow focus on those students who refuse school who were considered by participants as “at-risk.” Outcomes for at-risk students who have attendance problems focused on poverty, dropout, pregnancy, drug abuse, and violence. This finding is disconcerting for two reasons. First, the tendency of personnel to focus on a select category of school refusing students highlights the lack of focus on other categories. A possible explanation for this is that the harm has more extreme consequences for the at-risk students than other students.

The second reason relates to how the tendency to focus on a select group appears to drive programs. Programs to prevent negative consequences consisted of at-risk, incentive-based activities, and alternative educational options. The most important finding was that programs target the extreme outcomes for students, and few programs target the students in the middle. This is disconcerting, as it seems the options allow problems to progress to the worse case scenario prior to offering some type of program. Early intervention and prevention driven programs can be added to provide a continuum of prevention, early intervention, and intervention programs for school refusal.

Recommendations

Overall, recommendations provided by participants were directed towards problematic absenteeism in general. They focused on the school setting, the role of personnel, working with students, and involving parents in the intervention process. The most important finding in relation to school setting was ensuring that the school is a safe
haven and that all students feel welcome, nurtured, and comfortable. This finding correlates to studies that have revealed the importance of school connectedness and school climate and their relation to positive educational and health outcomes (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000; Parker, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Non-instructional personnel were considered important in terms of having flexible schedules within the school day that allow them to explore individual student’s reasons for refusal. Recommendations for improving identification included monitoring systems similar to the one described by one school. If there were a consistent mechanism for following up on student absences, early intervention is a viable option. The goal is to catch refusal to attend before it progresses to a chronic or severe pattern.

Suggestions offered aimed at improving interventions focused on personnel’s communication with students. The main theme was to focus on individual students from a holistic perspective. It was recommended that personnel approach students with open minds, consistency, and compassion. Participants also cautioned against the use of labels. Likewise, these same concepts emerged as important in personnel’s interactions with parents. Home-school collaboration was considered essential but personnel must be cognizant of pre-existing biases against schools that many parents have.

The Survey of School Refusal

The goal of the survey of school refusal was to assess the response of school personnel to students who refuse school in addition to gathering information regarding estimates of prevalence and characteristics of school refusal within the School District of Shermer County, the county in which interview data were also collected.
Foremost, several limitations must be highlighted prior to discussing the results. First, the sample size was relatively small; therefore, there are inherent limitations to the interpretation of these data. For example, only two of the responding schools were located in a rural setting, so any differences between geographic locations may be related to the small sample. Likewise, data are based on self-reported numbers hence accuracy is questionable. It is also important to point out that while definitions were provided, there was no way to ascertain how respondents interpreted questions related to excessive absenteeism and school refusal.

**Prevalence and Characteristics of School Refusal**

Overall, 11% of students were identified as refusing school in Shermer County. This is higher than most reported rates, although still within the reported estimated rates of excessive absenteeism. Reported rates of absenteeism range from 5.5 to 20% on a typical school day (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004). Likewise, Kearney (2001) estimated that as many as 28% of school-aged children refuse school at some point in time, with estimated prevalence rates ranging from 1-8% of the school age population (Berry, 1993; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).

Both high schools and rural schools identified higher rates of students refusing school. For high schools, this might be explained by increased autonomy. This corroborates with interview data indicating that high school students are responsible for getting to school each day, making it easier for them to refuse to attend if no one is present to reinforce it. In terms of schools in rural locations, this finding may be related to
the finding that students from migrant families are more often pressured into adult roles, hence leading to excessive absenteeism.

Somatic complaints in the absence of a medical condition were presented by 44% of identified schools refusers while 32% exhibited somatic complaints with a confirmed medical condition. Therefore, a large number of students who refuse school seen by school personnel will have some form of a somatic complaint, raising the importance of assessing whether somatic complaints are due to an existing illness. Otherwise, it is important to identify other causes of somatic complaints, such as psychological stress, victimization, or manipulative use of illness. This finding likewise calls attention to the important role of school health personnel in identifying and screening students. Middle schools reported a higher percentage of identified schools refusers with somatic complaints without a medical condition. Thus, at the middle school setting, school health personnel play a particularly important role as well.

The most frequently reported reason for school refusal was to engage in activities that are more enjoyable than school (22%). This reflects personnel’s categorization of students as defiant or truant students looking to have fun. The second most reported reasons included serving as a caregiver (13%) and the presence of depression or emotional problems (12%). These are both important reasons to consider. The issue of students serving in adult roles, such as caregiver, was a theme that emerged from interview data as well. Schools frown upon this; however, view it as unavoidable for some families. This might be indicative of a need for community level support for families.
The other reason, depression or emotional issues, is consistent with literature that suggests depression is an key factor to consider when identifying school refusal (Kearney, 2001; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). The most frequently reported reasons discussed here are also consistent with Stickey and Miltenberger’s (1998) findings, although they did not find serving as a caregiver as one of the secondary reasons as this study did.

Specific social related fear and specific school related fear accounted for approximately 12% of identified school refusers. Likewise, anxiety related to evaluation or performance anxiety or avoiding gym class accounted for approximately 8% of identified students. Overall, the data indicates that approximately 20% of the students identified as refusing do so because of some form of anxiety. This is an important finding for consideration in the development of identification and intervention plans.

Additionnally, it implores the question of how schools can work to decrease anxiety among students. These data also suggest that a small percent of students could potentially be identified as experiencing school phobia (5%), which is important given the importance of delineating motivation for refusal for appropriate and successful intervention (Elliott, 1999; King, Ollendick, & Tonge, 1995; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996).

School Response

All schools reported that a system was in place for identifying students who have problems with excessive absenteeism. This was consistent with state, district, and school level policies that require some form of an identification system for absenteeism. The majority of descriptions provided by respondents were consistent with interview data. Attendance reports were likewise important in the identification process and descriptions
again were similar to those within the interview data. There is typically one person in charge of reviewing the attendance report. However, the survey results indicated that aside from assistant principals and guidance counselors, teachers, principals, and social workers also reviewed this information regularly. Actions taken for students appearing on the attendance report included telephone calls home, referrals to the social worker, and letters sent home. Based on these results and the results from the interviews, it appears that the use of the attendance report is important; however, consistency and regularity of use should be standardized.

Surprisingly, the definition of an excessively absent student varied greatly between middle and high schools. Middle schools, on average considered 12 days as excessive, whereas high schools considered over 20 excessive. There might be several explanations to this finding. First, it might be that high schools are more tolerant of absenteeism. Likewise, they may have longer intervals between reviewing attendance reports, thus allowing students to accrue higher absences. High school personnel reported during interviews that review of attendance reports occurred every two or three weeks sometimes. High schools are also dealing with students, who once they turn 16, can legally decide to withdraw from school. Schools may allow students, specifically those 16 or older, to accrue high absences without intervention to proceed with withdrawals. This explanation is partially supported by the interview data but is speculative. Additionally this finding might be reflective of interview findings that characterized middle schools as more nurturing than high schools, which were considered impersonal.

Overall, schools reported confronting students in 75% of school refusal cases and notifying parents in 94% of cases. This finding was rather surprising, as it would seem
important to explore the reasons for refusal by talking to all students. It may be possible that more often schools contact parents before confronting students. Further information for why students and parents are not always included is warranted. Schools reported scheduling meetings most frequently with parents (59%) and least frequently between the student and school psychologist (30%). The latter, meetings with school psychologists, reflects interview data indicating that the role of the psychologist is to work with students referred during the intervention process, but not as a primary identifier.

Referrals are an important part of the school’s response to school refusal. Schools reported making referrals most frequently to the school social worker (20%) and least frequently to a psychiatrist (0.7%). One of the roles of the school social worker, as highlighted in the interview data, is to work with chronic attendance cases, and specifically cases of truancy. There appears to be consistency between the frequency of referrals to social workers (20%) and the frequency of “truancy” as the primary reason for refusal (22% - i.e., engaging in more enjoyable activities). However, court referrals, which are one of the culminating steps in truancy cases, were low (5%). A possible explanation is that many truancy cases end once a student turns 16 years of age, as compulsory attendance laws no longer bind them. An interesting finding was that in high schools, students were frequently referred to physicians and mental health counselors. More data is needed to explain this finding further.

Summary Conclusions

While research has focused on the phenomenon of school refusal for many years, few studies have explored the construction of this problem within the school setting. The findings from this exploratory qualitative study make a significant contribution to this
literature, and expand it in a new direction. The findings support the use of social
constructionism in understanding school personnel’s construction of school refusal.
Furthermore, the theory allows for an exploration of how these constructions influence
personnel’s practical experiences.

Qualitative analysis highlighted that within the school setting, school refusal,
along with all other attendance issues are conceptualized within the larger framework of
absenteeism. School personnel have defined perceptions and understanding of attendance
problems and this study reveals that these perceptions form a major part of their frame of
reference for all attendance related issues. Likewise, personnel delineate attendance
issues into problematic and non-problematic categories, focusing primarily on
problematic issues. Within personnel’s tendency to delineate, the role of the personnel,
specifically whether or not they are discipline focused, tends to influence perceptions
further. For example, assistant principals were more likely to view school refusal as
issues of truancy.

Interviews with participants further revealed that judgments of whether or not the
reason for absenteeism was legitimate were important and influenced personnel’s level of
empathy for students. Personnel constructed absenteeism as from both a social structure
diagnostic frame, focusing on school environment and culture, family dynamics, poverty,
and culture, and from an individual diagnostic frame, focusing on the individual student
and their family.

This study establishes that school personnel rarely use the terminology set forth
by professional literature, and lack an all-encompassing term for attendance issues or
school refusal. Those who did use professional terminology had specialized training,
however despite their knowledge of terms such as school refusal, they rarely used it in an applied manner within the schools. An interesting finding was that despite what seemed to be a lack of awareness for the professional literature related to school refusal, personnel’s constructions of school refusal are similar to those delineated within the research. Many participants focused on the motivating factors for refusal, differentiating various categories of students. These categories emerged from the stories personnel told about their practical experiences with students, thus substantiating the social constructionist perspective that reality is shaped by personal experiences.

These findings related to the general construction of attendance issues and the language of attendance and school refusal suggests several things. The first is that there is limited dissemination of research on school refusal. Within the school setting, it only reaches those personnel with more specialized training such as psychologists. Given this, the experts in school refusal research should consider making terminology and conceptualizations more inclusive to reach a broader segment of practitioners if they desire a larger impact on the practical actions of school personnel. Likewise, it is important to note that in no way is school refusal a part of the policy language of school attendance. This particular inconsistency reveals that school refusal is not an “officially” accepted problem.

In attempting to understand perceptions of school refusal, it became evident that most personnel categorize the behavior of school refusal based on motivation or reason, as well as delineate it according to certain elements. The major categorizations included fearful school refusal (school phobia), defiant school refusal (truancy-like), separation anxiety, illness based refusal, and emotionality based school refusal (anxiety or
depression). Grade level, transitions in school, legitimacy, and absenteeism patterns emerged as key elements that personnel used to describe and further delineate school refusal behaviors. These findings illustrate how personnel draw on their practical experiences to inform their perception of school refusal. Likewise, these elements revealed that some constructions are considered more serious than others are, and likewise draw different forms of attention from personnel.

Another area that is of importance was the descriptions of students who refuse school. Personnel explained the student experience of refusal as being driven by internal or external forces. Parents were viewed as a cause, enabling factor, or an influence on student’s refusal behavior. Likewise, if a student who refused school was from a low-income family, there was an overt perception that the family does not value education. Lastly, participants speculated about students’ perceptions of reality, particularly in cases of bullying. The major issue that emerged was that despite personnel’s statement that any student could refuse school, their construction revealed specific attributes. It highlights the potential for personnel to overlook students who do not fit within their accepted working descriptions of who refuses, illustrating a potential negative consequence of their categories.

Nine typifications of students, or collective descriptions, emerged from school personnel’s stories about students who refuse school. The overarching dynamics of these typifications included parental control, parental awareness, student locus of control, blame, and victim status. The implication of these typifications is that they influence how personnel react to students they encounter, assisting personnel in deciding who is deserves help or punishment, thus having implications for intervention and policy.
While these typifications should be used to inform intervention and policy, there are other influences on personnel as well. Personnel’s own experiences in schools, as parents, and as former students themselves appear to have a heavy influence on their perceptions. Administrators, responsible for accountability and enforcement of policies, are likewise influenced by the politics of attendance. The inherent inference is the impact these influences, paired with the issues of identification, and could lead to inequalities in school-based intervention efforts.

The most important indicator used in identifying students who refuse school is their attendance record. The most apparent problem is that attendance alone reveals little about the nature or reason for the absence, and relies on reliable, valid, and timely bookkeeping and review. The responsibility for review and identification is often placed on one person, and are not conducted daily. Unless absences or refusal to attend is accompanied by overt behaviors like emotional distress or physical refusal, personnel do not explore reasons in depth until a pattern has formed.

Teachers, already overwhelmed with class and school duties, are responsible for keeping track of attendance as well, and alerting others of any patterns. They serve as gatekeepers to other services that can help students who are refusing. There are both informal and formal mechanisms for this; however, the major problem is that multiple people are identifying students with varying consistency. The development of a structured and formal monitoring system would help in consistency and accuracy of identification, helping to prevent students from falling through cracks only to be discovered “too late.” With this in mind, as well as the high level of frustration teachers have for students who refuse, there is a need for teacher support and education on school
refusal and identification. School health personnel would also benefit from education as they often provide informal screening for school refusal, as in the case of frequent fliers.

The intervention process for any attendance issue consists of a series of formal telephone calls, letters, and meetings, all tracked on an intervention form. This is the basis for the formal process of dealing with problematic absenteeism, and there is no other formal process for specific types of absenteeism, such as school refusal. However, several informal deviations were reported as occurring within the formal process, which were related to specific types of absenteeism. Personnel reported more flexibility in their responses to students who are refusing school such as bullying, illness, or emotional issues. The major deviation was the decision of whether to refer a student to support services (emotional or behavioral students) or student affairs (defiant students). When triangulated with data from personnel who work in those areas there are obvious differential consequences for this decision, mainly that students referred to student affairs are punished. This finding substantiates that practical categorizations have very real implications, and in this case, affects the student. The key point that must be considered is the timing of the identification and student referral. Has the student had a pattern developing over time and has surfaced as defiance? Is the student experiencing a new problem with refusing to attend and expressing emotional distress? Again, issues of identification are of significance, specifically, accurate and timely identification.

The constructions of the consequences of school refusal included immediate outcomes, such as school failure to long-term outcomes, like increased welfare costs. There was a tendency to focus on “at-risk” students who refuse school and this might be due to the perception of more extreme consequences. Once again, it draws attention the
tendency to focus on a select category of students, which could possibly be at the expense of other students.

Programs to target and prevent the negative outcomes personnel associated with school refusal represented two ends of a spectrum. At-risk programs, with the goal of providing students with a meaningful attachment, and incentive programs that reward school attendance were two main types of programs mentioned. The programs appear to target the extreme outcomes, or reward the students who rarely have a problem. There is an apparent need for programs that target the students in the middle to provide earlier intervention, or possibly prevention of school refusal. Programs that aim at increasing levels of connectedness and social comfort within schools might be a good starting point, given the findings in this study indicating increased refusal during transitions in schooling, and related changes in both the school and social climate.

Recommendations reflected this sentiment, with personnel suggesting that schools ensure an environment that is welcoming and safe to all students. This nurturing environment should expand beyond the primary school setting. Within this particular school district, efforts are already being made at the high school level via the introduction of a Small Learning Communities pilot, which groups students within a school into small groups or teams. Small Learning Communities, a federal grant program created by the U.S. Department of Education, has shown to have positive implications for student attitudes towards school, behavior, as well as increasing academic achievements (Cleary & English, 2005; Dryfoos, 2000).

Further recommendations emphasized personnel-student-home communication. Suggestions from personnel focused on approaching students who refuse school from a
holistic perspective with an open mind, while cautioning against the use of labels. The view that parents who do not have an education themselves do not value education might represent an inaccurate norm. Given this and some of personnel’s other negative perceptions of parents, introducing some type of relationship building mechanism might be useful.

Finally, based on the findings of the Survey of School Refusal, future research should examine the reasons as to why not all students identified as refusing school are confronted. Likewise, including parents in all cases was described as paramount in interviews; however, it was not 100% according to survey data, thus the reasons for this should be explored as well. Findings of this study suggest that team approaches are lacking, which is contrary to the recommendations within the literature as well as the findings from interviews in this study. It might be useful to educate school administration as well as personnel about identifying and intervening in school refusal. Continuing education that incorporates school personnel’s categorizations with the professional literature into existing identification and interventions processes might be useful.

Limitations of the Study

Sample

This study used multiple levels of sampling based on each method of data collection. All sampling was non-probabilistic; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all school districts. Additionally, two of the data collection methods attempted a total sample, and this was not achieved. At the district level, some departments did not allow all personnel to participate in interviews; therefore, there was
not equal representation across departments. The other attempted total sample was for the
survey, and despite multiple attempts, it was not achieved.

Schools that participated in this study were selected via a purposeful, stratified
random sample. Therefore, schools selected may be different from schools not selected.
From those schools, personnel were sampled using a stratified purposeful sample as well.
Personnel were invited to participate, but not required. Consequently, some categories of
personnel are underrepresented. The final issue is a concern related to sample size, which
although large for a qualitative study, was determined by saturation. This is a subjective
determination that I used to determine that I had enough representation of middle and
high school personnel and across categories of school personnel that revealed similar
themes across data. Due to the subjective nature, there is the potential for researcher bias
thus this must be considered.

Study Design

Given that this study is qualitative and exploratory, the intrinsic limitation is that a
cause and effect relationship or statistical associations cannot be determined. There are a
few other issues that should be highlighted as well. School level participants were 70%
female, thus, their perspective could be different from their male counterparts. Secondly,
all findings are based on self-reported data. Although I found it surprising, several
incidents made me aware that school refusal and conversations about attendance issues
was a sensitive topic. One participant had me stop tape recording to re-confirm the
meaning of confidentiality, and two asked that I not tape-record at all. Thus, I cannot be
completely certain that participants were honest in their responses.
The nature of conducting interviews requires rapport building and trust. While I perceived increased trust due to repeated interactions with personnel during my observation period, I cannot confirm that all participants were comfortable in the interview. However, many participants did share information that I personally considered sensitive, indicating they were comfortable. Likewise, due to the nature of conducting interviews in the school setting, there were repeated interruptions from school bells ringing, telephone calls, and other personnel barging into the room. While the location of interview was the most convenient for the participants, it was not always conducive to smooth, uninterrupted interviews.

Lastly, while this study adds to the literature by focusing on the perceptions of personnel, who are in the likely role of identifying students who refuse school, it simultaneously excludes the students and their families. Therefore, only the school personnel’s side of the story is told. It was beyond the means of this study to include students and parents. Further, the inclusion of students and parents raised concerns for the school district regarding issues of confidentiality. From a theoretical perspective, this is also limiting, as it is common for adults to speak on behalf of children specifically in regards to social problems (Loseke, 2003). Future research endeavors should seek out students and parents to tell their stories related to school refusal to develop a full picture.

Data Collection Tools

Interviews

In-depth interviewing is an excellent data collection method for exploratory research especially when there is a need to obtain rich detailed data. Despite the usefulness of this method, there are inherent limitations that must be addressed. First,
some personnel perceived themselves as not knowledgeable enough to do an interview. Often they would agree to participate but only after reassurance that I really was not “looking” for answers, but was truly interested in their experiences. Therefore, some participants’ responses may have been guarded. Similarly, particular groups of personnel had a harder time articulating responses to questions. I had to engage them more and employ more probing than in other interviews. This was typically the case with health assistant’s, school resource officers, and office personnel.

Additionally given the theoretical framework of social constructionism, a major goal was to avoid any instances of leading when possible. This was done by asking for stories instead of probing for specific words or using a pre-determined language. The questioning all focused on the behavior of “students who refuse school.” In most interviews, this was not a problem, but for some participants it appeared to be confusing when I began to ask for stories. For some participants this freedom led to long, protracted stories that did not relate to attendance issues and I had to redirect the participant. This was done carefully to avoid leading.

Within interviews, some participants became extremely comfortable, and used the interview as a way to blow off steam. I found it necessary to re-direct participants; however, I did allow them to vent frustrations to an extent. Sometimes their frustrations were related school refusal. However, several participants vented about racism, prejudice, and politics within the school. Occurrences such as these should be expected within in-depth interviews; however, this takes time away from the focus of the interview.

Lastly, from a subjective researcher perspective, an inherent limitation that emerged was a by-product of maintaining the social constructionist “know-nothing”
research stance. As a subjective researcher and someone who never worked in a school setting, I presented myself as someone who knew nothing about the experiences of school personnel. Several times participants tried to move me out of this position and into the role of an expert. This was particularly difficult with district level participants, as some were suspicious of my study. Several participants asked me “what I really was trying to get at in my study,” implying deceptiveness on my part. Although I had a method of handling this, through verbal reinforcement and reaffirmation that I wanted to learn about their experiences with students who refuse school, I have no way of accounting for whether these perceptions affected their responses.

Observations

Limitations to the observations conducted in this study were predominantly related to issues of confidentiality. Descriptive data about schools were collected, but due to the potential for schools to be identified from such descriptions, limits were placed on what could be reported. This invariably affects the transferability of these data. However, this element of data collection allowed for triangulation of findings during data analysis.

The Survey of School Refusal

The Survey of School Refusal had several inherent limitations that must be addressed. The survey relied on self-reported data and there is no way to determine if the data reported was pulled from actual records or if it consisted of estimates. Additionally there was the potential for misinterpretation of questions. Despite providing definitions for school refusal and operationalizing it as a measurable behavior (excessive absenteeism), definitional issues remain a limitation. Although the response rate was 61%, I cannot determine to what degree schools that did not provide data differ from
schools that did. An additional limitation is the sample of schools. These schools are located in Shermer County, therefore the degree to which these results are transferable to schools in other counties is not known. Overall, aside from these limitations the survey was useful as an exploratory investigation of schools’ responses to school refusal.

**Strengths of the Study**

**Sample**

As a qualitative exploratory study, purposeful, stratified sampling was used to ensure representation of the various personnel included in the study. At the district level within each of the selected departments, I was able to interview at least one person. Although findings cannot reflect individual departments, there were sufficient interviews conducted to provide the district perspective. In the random selection of schools for the study, using a design that stratified schools by geographic area ensured a broad, representative selection of schools. At the school level, I used a sampling matrix to recruit a sufficient number of participants within each category of personnel by middle and high school. In regards to the Survey, a total sample was attempted. Participants received a pre-letter, the survey, and reminder postcard, and then a second survey. These methods were implemented with the goal of an increased response rate. The final response rate was 61%, which was acceptable. Overall, this study sampling design was unique in that it expands previous research by focusing on the perceptions of various categories of school personnel as opposed to individual students.

**Study Design**

This study makes a significant contribution to the research literature on school refusal. While similar studies have been conducted, they have mainly focused on the
cultural context in which school refusal occurs. Further, the majority of these studies have been conducted within Japan. No qualitative studies to date have explored perceptions of school refusal, particularly those of school personnel in the U.S. Additionally, this study is one of the first to use the theoretical framework of social constructionism to understand and examine school personnel’s conceptualizations of school refusal. The manner in which the theory informed the study design, data collection methods, and data analysis adds support to the utility of the framework of social constructionism.

The design of this study employed multiple methods that provided powerful insight into the complexities of school personnel’s perceptions of school refusal. Likewise, the use of multiple methods allowed for the triangulation of data that was useful in both data collection and analysis. The use of multiple methods and triangulation increases the credibility of these findings. Prolonged engagement within each school setting accompanied by persistent observation also adds to the credibility.

Rigorous and regular peer de-briefings were used to review data collection methods and emerging themes further ensuring both the credibility and dependability of the data and data analysis. To ensure dependability of the research data and findings, an audit trail was maintained that consisted of systematic record keeping, along with field notes, a journal, files, and memos.

Lastly, given the social constructionist framework for this study, the language of the participants was used. The study confirms that school personnel conceptualize school refusal differently from that of the experts who conduct research on it. This is an important finding, specifically when developing identification methods or interventions
Data Collection Tools

The use of observations was helpful in establishing a rapport with participants prior to the interview itself. It also provided a glimpse into the social climate of each school setting. The use of semi-structured interviews had several advantages. The most important advantage was the ability to explore the topic in detail. Secondly, the language personnel used within the interview was helpful in future interviews, specifically technical language related to the school processes. Other language and terminology related to school refusal was helpful in probing in interviews throughout data collection. This will also be helpful in future research on school refusal. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviewed allowed for exploration of the complex delineations of school refusal offered by participants.

The survey, while fraught with several limitations, provided thorough contextual data related to excessive absenteeism and school refusal. It likewise allowed for verification of findings from the interview data, increasing the credibility and dependability of the research.

Implications and Recommendations

Despite a multi-disciplinary, international literature, little research has drawn attention to the phenomenon of school refusal within the school. The majority of school refusal research has constructed this phenomenon as cases of individual pathology among students. These studies have centered on students who have been referred through various channels to some form of medical care, usually psychiatric. However, school refusal still

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begins in the same location: school. Several studies have highlighted the need to focus on schools as this is often the first place were students are identified as refusing school (Brulle & McIntyre, 1985; Elliott, 1999; King & Bernstein, 2001; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). In particular, the role of school personnel in the identification of such students has remained relatively unexplored. Given the inherent definitional issues that have plagued school refusal research, prevalence of school refusal is unclear. Without understanding school personnel’s construction of school refusal within the school, further attempts at measuring prevalence will continue to generate mere estimates. Additionally, without a clear understanding of the reality of school refusal in the school setting, it is difficult to understand the manner in which personnel identify and intervene.

This study makes a substantial contribution to the literature on school refusal. First, it grounds the phenomenon of school refusal within the location of which it occurs, the school setting. Secondly, it captures school personnel’s construction of school refusal. Regardless of the research conducted in the expert world of school refusal, school personnel play a central role in constructing the problem of school refusal. This is especially important given the finding that personnel are not influenced by the expert literature. This study authenticates school personnel’s practical constructions as having real implications for students who are refusing school, how they are identified, and what is done to intervene. This study presents contributions to three major areas in the research on school refusal: education practice and policy, public and school health practice, and policy, and research.
Dissemination of Findings

The findings from this study will be disseminated in various arenas. In terms of education, providing findings to the school district in which the study was conducted, as well as practitioner-oriented organizations will help to raise awareness of school refusal as a part of problematic absenteeism as well as highlight some of the issues within schools that hinder the identification of this problem. School officials may use these findings to build support for programs that increase sensitivity to attendance issues, and to correct the misuse of current policies such as withdrawing students. Likewise, on an individual school basis, these findings can help guide the revision of current practices related to school absenteeism. School advocates may use these findings to draw attention to support the movement to decrease inequalities in educational outcomes.

The findings will also be disseminated to public health and school health organizations and professional publications. Although previous research has attempted to construct school refusal as an issue of importance in public health and school health, this has not been particularly successful as in other countries (Chiland & Young, 1990). This research will help in building the case for school refusal as an important public and school health problem that can affect the health and well-being of students in both their present and future outcomes. Specifically, it will be important to provide findings to outlets that reach school health practitioners such as school nurses and health assistants, given their role in screening students who might be refusing school. These data can be used to influence policy that addresses issues of school health, specifically mental, social, and emotional health.
These findings can also be used to support recent recommendations for the development of a research network of individuals who study school attendance problems (Kearney, 2003). Whether in the form of a conference or a consortium, these findings confirm the need for a formal network of researchers and practitioners to provide an outlet for communication, collaboration, and research. Lastly, dissemination of this research within social constructionist literature will contribute to expanded use of this theoretical framework.

Policy

Public policy efforts related to school refusal are most likely to occur at either the state or local level, however past reports have indicated national and international action given the occurrence of school refusal across cultural contexts (Committee for Economic Development, 1987; United Nations, 1999). Education policy must focus on several issues related to school refusal. One would be the expansion of current attendance policies to include accurate conceptualizations of problematic absenteeism. Current state policy focuses on truancy, but the findings of this study reveal the complex, multi-faceted nature of school absenteeism. Given that findings indicated a lack of consistency in understanding attendance problems, the implications are that this consistency can lead to inaccurate or low identification and responses. Policy should not only expand beyond the umbrella of truancy, but also take into consideration school personnel’s practical categorizations of student attendance issues, as otherwise there is no internal consistency between policy and action.

Educational leaders must review the impact of current policies on what I have referred to in this study as the “politics of attendance.” It appears that unspoken processes
in schools such as withdrawing students, or “clearing” the rolls are accepted as unavoidable regardless of the acknowledged consequences. Schools are doing what is necessary with the resources they have to meet the state and federal standards for accountability, while contradicting the intention of policies such as No Child Left Behind.

Educational reform policy also needs to consider the social and ecological effects of school. The findings in this study point to the importance of the school social environment and its influence on school refusal. With the increased awareness of bullying and school violence, the importance of the school social setting should be considered within future reform efforts. Bullying was a common theme within this study and often cited as a cause of school refusal. Findings also suggested that primary school is more nurturing than secondary, thus contributing to an uncomfortable, negative school experience. A policy that assures all schools promote and maintain a safe, nurturing environment for all students is critical to addressing and preventing school refusal.

Public and school health policy currently does not focus on school attendance as an issue. However, given that one of the HP 2010 objectives is to increase the high school graduation rate, policies that advocate for decreasing high rates of absenteeism are needed. Such policy initiatives should target primary school levels, as the findings in this study suggest that attendance patterns can be established at very young ages. Further, participants in this study suggested making and enforcing stringent parental responsibility laws. The effectiveness of such actions is uncertain, however, should be evaluated.

At the school health level, advocacy for policy that increases the presence of school nurses is imperative. School nurses play a pivotal role in both screening for school
refusal as well as keeping students in school. There is a constant struggle to keep school health services a priority in education, thus these findings can be used to bolster advocacy efforts.

**Educational Training**

Findings in this study indicate that school personnel are inconsistent in their understanding of attendance issues in general. The practical experiences inform their actions, and there is a lack of awareness of the professional literature. Given that attendance issues are relatively widespread, educational training on a variety of school attendance issues for all school personnel is warranted. It is specifically important for those personnel who are considered primary in the role of identification or might find themselves in that role. The content of such training should use the language of school personnel, as opposed to expert terminology. Training should also be extended to decision-makers within the school district, such as school board members, district level administrators, and school level administrators.

Content for higher level personnel, such as administrators and school board members, might include information about the global occurrence of school refusal and other attendance issues, school personnel’s perceptions of these issues and the consequences (both documented and perceived) of these issues if not resolved. Additionally, the content of educational training should include personnel’s constructions of students who refuse school, while incorporating new conceptualizations to build onto their existing realities. Training must also address prevention, early intervention, identification, and responses, while incorporating strategies for working with students and parents.
The need for educational training on school refusal also extends to public health professionals who work in areas related to school health, child and adolescent health, or given the findings of this study, in areas of research focusing on bullying, school connectedness, or delinquency. With the increased awareness and acknowledgement in the field of public health of issues affecting child and adolescent populations, it is imperative to translate research on school refusal into appropriate educational training for this specific audience of public health professionals. This may include educational training targeting professionals who work within schools, communities, or other areas of public health, as often these professionals work both with and in schools, or separately with child and adolescent populations (Noland, Troxler, & Torrens Salemi, 2004). Content of such training may include general awareness of school refusal, the relationship of school refusal to other issues such as bullying, school connectedness, and longer-term outcomes (i.e., mental health or educational outcomes).

*Prevention and Early Intervention*

Education efforts for personnel must also be accompanied by prevention and early intervention initiatives. Prevention for school refusal and attendance related issues should draw on the findings from this study, previous studies, and additional research on attendance problems. From the findings in this study, prevention efforts might start by targeting the school setting to increase levels of school connectedness. Mentoring and peer facilitator programs could assist in providing students with a meaningful connection to school. Such programs might be particularly helpful at transitional periods within schooling, such as moving from elementary to middle school. Additionally prevention efforts should focus on nurturing positive home-school connections. The effects of
bullying prevention programs on attendance rates should also be explored, given that bullying may instigate school refusal.

Early intervention efforts should be incorporated into educational training for staff. Efforts should focus on identifying students before the development or at the onset of a pattern of non-attendance. The development of a screening protocol that can be used by various personnel would assist in identifying students based on behavioral indicators as opposed to strict adherence to attendance data. This might assist in identifying the situation that could lead to school refusal, such as bullying.

Screening mechanisms such as a monitoring system could help increase the regularity of reviewing attendance records. This could help decrease the number of students who “fall through the cracks.” An attendance team composed of key personnel who meet regularly to review school attendance procedures and data could help increase proactive responses. Likewise, such a team could develop a structured communication and referral protocol for attendance issues that is more inclusive of student support services as opposed to disciplinary action.

Recommendations for Research

The findings in this study raise important issues about past research on school refusal. Future research must frame school refusal within the language of those working with students, such as school personnel, as opposed to the expert terminology used by a select group of people who work with a small percentage of students. To expand on the outcomes of this study, I propose the recommendations below be taken into consideration for future research.
1. Using the language and categorizations school personnel used to describe students who refuse school, develop a screening approach. This screening approach would need to be tested in various settings to determine its utility.

2. Using the research undertaken in this study, develop separate studies that focus on parents’ and students’ perceptions and experiences with refusing school, from a social constructionist framework, to develop the full story of students who refuse school.

3. To understand constructions of school refusal as well as were it fits within school attendance issues in general, this study could be replicated with modifications in different cultural settings with varying social contexts. This would assist in developing an understanding of how the social contexts of different cultures influence conceptualizations of school attendance issues. Aside from developing a cross-cultural perspective of these phenomena, it would provide data to inform identification, prevention, and early intervention efforts in different settings.

4. Research on possible links between bullying and school refusal should be explored given the findings in this study using national data sets such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health or the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance.

5. The development of a survey instrument that incorporates a broader definition of attendance problems would assist in developing accurate prevalence rates. Such an instrument would be helpful to support future research efforts.

6. The findings in this study, as well as previous studies, call attention to inherent problems in how attendance records are documented within schools. Future research efforts should investigate improved methods for tracking attendance.
7. Given that responses to school refusal appear to be dependent on the perception of the personnel who identify the student (i.e., assistant principals appear more likely to discipline) future research might look further into the differential outcomes of students based on who identifies them.
REFERENCES


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### Appendix A: Delineated Terms and Definitions Related to School Refusal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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| School Refusal                             | “Students who refuse to attend school for various unexplained reasons” *(Kearney, 2001).*  
Refers to “students who *have difficulty* in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day” *(Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998).* |
| School Refusal Behavior *(Kearney, 2001)* | Generally, a child-motivated refusal to attend school, difficulties remaining in class for an entire day, or both *(Kearney & Silverman, 1996).* Refers to children aged 5-17 who refuse to attend school and/or have trouble remaining in class for an entire day *(Kearney & Albano, 2000).* |
| School Phobia                              | Differentiated from Truancy  
1. Severe difficulty attending school, often resulting in prolonged absence  
2. Severe emotional upset, including excessive fearfulness, temper outbursts, or complaints of feeling ill when faced with the prospect of going to school  
3. Staying home with the parent’s knowledge when the youngster should be at school  
4. Absence of antisocial characteristics such as stealing, lying, and destructiveness *(Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard, 1969).* |
| School Phobia                              | “anxiety and irrational fear related to being in school,” and explicitly focusing on the ages of early to middle adolescence *(Contessa & Paccione-Dyszalewski, 1981).*  
A set of behaviors characterized by persistent absenteeism not due to truancy or actual illness. An exaggerated or irrational fear of attending school *(Paige, 1993).*  
Also referred to as specific phobia of school indicated by intense fear of some school-related stimulus. Specific phobia is the “marked and persistent fear of clearly discernible, circumscribed objects or situations” *(American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 405).* |
| Separation Anxiety                         | “childhood anxiety disorder that is characterized by excessive anxiety (fear, worry) concerning separation from a major attachment figure and/or home” *(Last, 1988).*  
Separation anxiety is listed as a disorder in the DSM-IV with specific diagnostic criteria *(American Psychiatric Association, 2000).* |
Appendix B: Timeline for Data Collection

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Appendix C: Approval to Use the Survey of School Refusal

From: Ray Miltenberger [Ray.Miltenberger@ndsu.nodak.edu]
Sent: Friday, February 27, 2004 4:15 PM
To: Anna Torrens Salemi
Subject: Re: Permission to use survey

Hi Anna,
You are certainly welcome to use the survey we reported in our paper. Best of luck in your research. I would be interested in hearing about your findings once you complete the study.

Regards,
Ray Miltenberger
Raymond G. Miltenberger, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Psychology
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Fargo, ND 58105
Phone: (701) 231 8623
Fax: (701) 231 8426
http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndsu/psychology/facstaf/MILTENBE/index.html

At 02:20 PM 2/27/2004 -0500, you wrote:

Good Afternoon Dr. Miltenberger,
My name is Anna Torrens Salemi and I am a doctoral candidate in Public Health at the University of South Florida. I am in the process of writing my dissertation proposal of which the purpose is to investigate how school personnel construct their perceptions of school refusal within the school setting and how their perceptions affects interactions and social processes with students who experience school refusal. I have read the paper published in Education and Treatment of Children by Stickney & yourself (School refusal behavior: prevalence, characteristics, and the schools' response., 1998) – and would like to ask permission to use the survey that was conducted in North Dakota. I have been unable to locate contact information for Dr. Stickney, but found your information online. I appreciate the consideration of my request, and look forward to your response. If you would like for me to contact Dr. Stickney, if you have her information, I would be more than happy to send her an email as well.

Sincerely,
Anna Torrens Salemi, MPH, CHES
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Community & Family Health
University of South Florida, College of Public Health
13201 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.
MDC 56
Tampa, FL 33612
tel. 813.974.6687
e-mail. asalemi@hsc.usf.edu
Appendix D: General Interview Guide

Reminders to Researcher
1. I know nothing – I as the researcher am here to learn from this person’s experiences.
2. Do not think about “the literature.”
3. I am asking about the behavior “refuse to attend school or have difficulty attending or remaining in school the entire day.”
4. Do no probe until necessary! Let them exhaust everything.
5. Do not lead nor provide terminology.

Introduction
I am conducting a study to learn and understand your experiences, thoughts, ideas, and perceptions regarding students who refuse to attend school or who have difficulty attending school or remaining in school for the entire day.

I am conducting interviews with various district level personnel and throughout various schools as well. I want to learn about how you understand these students, your perceptions of students who have these difficulties attending school, and your thoughts on why it happens. I am also interested in how you identify these students and what your experiences have been.

Appreciation
- Know you are busy - thank you for taking the time to meet and talk with me
- Your participation is voluntary - if at anytime you feel uncomfortable and would like to stop, just let me know

Tape-Recording
- As I mentioned when I contacted you, I would like to tape record our discussion
- Focus on our conversation rather than worrying about taking notes
- This information will not be accessible to anyone but me, and your name will not be recorded or used anywhere within the transcript of the tape
- May I turn it on now and ask you to confirm that it is okay to record this? [Start Tape].
- This discussion is about you, your thoughts, experiences, ideas, and concerns.
- The information that we learn during our time together will be reported in a confidential manner.
- No individual or school information will be identified.
- Before we start, do you have any questions?

Warm-Up Question (optional)
Tell me about your role/position.

Opening Questions
Tell me why you think kids don’t come to school.
[VARIOUS VERSIONS OF SAME QUESTION ↓]
- What makes it hard for kids to come to school?
- What makes coming to school difficult for some kids?
- What makes attending school difficult for some kids?
- What makes it hard for some kids to stay in school during the day?
Appendix D (Continued)

Have you ever known a student like this?
Tell me about your experience.
Tell me a story.

*Do not differentiate students for them. Let them talk about one “type” of student or however they categorize them. Ask for a story about each student they discuss. Then, ask them to talk about some more students. Continue to probe about more students “Tell me about some more students” - until participant appears to have exhausted everything they can discuss without being prompted.*

**Reminders:**
- Note the order in which the participant discusses different types of students.
- Note any terminology, or the absence of terminology.
- Document unprompted versus prompted responses (no probe versus probe).

**Key Questions/Areas to Cover:**
- Description (general)
- Specific descriptions of students
- Experiences with students
- Identification of students
- Programs
- Perceptions
- Influences on Understanding

*Below are all probes for each area – as I ask people to talk about more and more students, I am listening for these various areas to be covered. Only when they are not covered, should I probe. It is important to note when and where probes are used.*

**Description**
Tell me what you think of these students.
How do you describe what they are experiencing?
How would you define/describe these students?
Are there any specific words you would use?
How do you differentiate between these students and others?
If you were training a new teacher/counselor, what would you tell them are ways to identify these students?

**Description of students (more specific)**
How would you describe a student that is dealing with these issues?
What does a student like this look like to you?
*Only if this does not come out, ask for specifics such as grades, age, maturity level, family structure, behavior, mental health, and potential causes.*

**Experiences with students**
Tell me about your experiences with these students.
Appendix D (Continued)

What caught your attention?
Were there any signs that alerted you?
What happened?
Tell me about your interactions with these students.
[Only looking for this to be discussed – do not probe].
What has happened if you thought a student had this issue but they didn’t?

Identification
How are these students identified?
What happens when a student is identified?
What do you do if you are confronted with a student who appears to be dealing with this issue?
    Probe: Who would you talk to? [Note who is not mentioned].
    What administrators, teachers, personnel, etc. would be involved?
    What happens?
How do these other personnel interact when working with students?
    Probe: How often do you communicate with these other personnel?
If communication does occur, how is it structured? Daily? Weekly? Monthly? Meetings?
Teams? Unstructured?
Are parents involved?
Tell me about the level of parental involvement.
    Probe: Interactions with parents?

[District Level Section Programs]
Tell me about programs related to this issue (repeat for each student described).
What programs or policies would you identify that specifically relate to these students?
Probe: Student Progression Plan
    School Board Policy Manual
    Bullying Prevention Program
    Florida Statutes
    Student Handbook Manual
    School level policies
    Other school or district level programs

Perceptions
Tell me about some of your opinions regarding these students?
What is your level of concern for these students? District level concerns?
Why does it happen? Causes? Outcomes?
How do you think it happens?
What are the differences in the importance of this issue now as compared to the past?
How has No Child Left Behind influenced your perceptions of these students?

Influences on Understanding
How have you learned about these students?
What influences your understanding of these students?
Describe any policies or procedures that you know of that relate to these students.
Appendix D (Continued)

Where do you turn for information on these students?
What kind of information have you seen that is related to these students?

Closing
Of everything we have talked about, what is the most important thing you would like me to take away from this?

Only do this at the very end OR in the event that participant exhaust’s their “stories” early, use this.

As I mentioned before, this study is about your perceptions of “students who refuse to attend school and who have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day.”

When I provide you with this description, what does this mean to you?
When I say the following terms, are any of them familiar to you?
What do they mean to you?
Terms: Absenteeism, School Refusal, School Phobia, School Avoidance, Separation Anxiety
Are there any you would apply to the categories of students you have described?

If the participant has not been able to talk very much, go through and probe with previous questions.

Appreciation. Thank you for your time. This information will be very helpful.
Appendix E: Probes for Interviewing

**Redirecting**
Let's move on:
- to the next question.
- to a different topic.

**Probing**
[Use ambiguous words]
- I see
- That’s interesting

**Silent probe**
5 seconds while maintaining eye contact

**Paralanguage**
Ummm, Uh-huh
Tone of voice

**Elaborating**
Could you tell me more about that?
Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?
You started to say something about?
Is there anything else?

**Specifying**
What specifically about _________ makes you feel that way?
What else do you think about _____?
What other reasons do you have for feeling that way?
What else do you think about that?

**Laddering**
[ask a series of questions to get more specific comments and uncover root causes]
In what way is it good?
What about it do you like?
What does it mean to you?
How does that make you feel?
BUT be careful not to lead!

**Specific examples**
I see, can you give me an example of that?
How might someone do that?
Would you give me an example of what you mean?

**Clarifying**
I don’t understand
I am not sure I understand how you are using the word ________?
I’m a bit confused, could you try again to explain what ________?
Could you explain what you mean by ________?

**Repeating**
[If confused you can repeat the question or their answer.]
Let me repeat the question…
So, the message you wanted me to get from that story is….
Appendix F: Demographic Information Sheet

Demographic Information Sheet

Thank you for participating in this study. This information is for descriptive purposes only. All potentially identifiable information will remain strictly confidential.

GENDER (circle one): MALE FEMALE

GRADE LEVELS YOUR WORK WITH: ________________________________

SCHOOL: ______________________________________________________

POSITION AT SCHOOL: ____________________________________________

YEARS IN CURRENT POSITION:

________________________________________________________________

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION: ________________________________

UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR: ___________ MINOR: ______________

IF GRADUATE DEGREE, MAJOR: ________________________________

ADDITIONAL TRAINING?: _________________________________________

AT ANY TIME DURING YOUR EDUCATION TO SERVE IN YOUR CURRENT ROLE, WERE YOU EXPOSED TO INFORMATION RELATED TO WHAT WE HAVE DISCUSSED TODAY? (Circle one)

YES (if yes, please describe below) NO

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT IN EDUCATION:
(Describe grade levels you worked with and position held)

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Thank you for your time!

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Appendix G: Document Extraction Tool

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<td>Does this document contain information related to school attendance?</td>
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<td>If yes, document pages numbers:</td>
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<td>Does this document mention problems related to school attendance?</td>
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<td>Does this document refer to programs that deal with attendance issues? If yes, document pages numbers:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does this document refer to procedures related to school attendance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, document pages numbers:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H: Observation Guide

Consider the following during participant observation:

SETTING
What is the physical environment?
What is the context?
What kind of behavior does the setting encourage, permit, discourage, or prevent?

PARTICIPANTS
Who is in the scene?
How many people are there?
What are the roles of the people present?
What brings these people together?
Who is allowed here?

ACTIVITIES & INTERACTIONS
What is going on?
Is there a definable sequence of activities?
How do the people interact with the activities and one another?
How are people and activities connected or interrelated?

FREQUENCY & DURATION
When did the situation begin?
How long does it last?
Is it a recurring type of situation or unique?
If the situation reoccurs, how frequently?
What are the occasions that led to it?
How typical does this situation appear to be?

SUBTLE FACTORS
Informal activities
Unplanned activities
Nonverbal communication (dress, physical space, facial expressions)
What does not happen? (Especially if it was expected).
Appendix I: Survey of School Refusal

This survey has 13 questions regarding school refusal at your school during the 2003-2004 school year (last school year). Some of the questions may require you to obtain input from some of your school faculty (i.e., the school psychologist, nurse, or guidance counselor). Additionally, some questions will require you to make estimates of data. A general definition of school refusal is provided for your reference.

*School refusal, for the purposes of this survey, is defined as “students who refuse to attend school” and “have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day.”*

1. Which of the following best describes your school? *Please circle appropriate letter.*
   
   a. High school
   b. Middle School

   *What grades are included in your school? ____________*

2. Which of the following best describes the area your school is located in?

   a. Rural
   b. Suburban
   c. Urban
   d. Other (please specify):

   ________________________________

3. What number of students attends your school? ____________

4. Please indicate the title of the person responsible for determining which students have a problem with excessive absences.

   ________________________________

5. Does the school have a system in place for identifying a student who has a problem with excessive absences?

   a. Yes (if yes, please describe in the space below.)
   b. No
Appendix I (Continued)

6. What number of absences (for students who do not have a medical condition that would justify their absences) is considered excessive (cause for concern)?
   __________

7. What number of students have been identified as evidencing excessive school absenteeism since the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year?
   __________
   a. What number exhibited physical complaints with no confirmed medical problem?: #________
   b. What number exhibited physical complaints with a confirmed medical condition?: #________

8. How many of the identified students (from question 7) have been referred to court for truancy?
   __________

9. How many of the identified students were referred to:
   a. Mental health counselor #________
   b. Physician (family doctor, pediatrician) #________
   c. Psychiatrist #________
   d. Psychologist #________
   e. Social worker #________
   f. Other (please specify below) #________

_________________________________________

_________________________________________
10. Below are a number of reasons for school absenteeism. Please indicate the number of students refusing school for which each of the following was the primary reason for the school absenteeism.

- Anxiety associated with evaluative situations such as tests or oral presentations
- Serving as a caregiver for parents and/or siblings
- Depression or other emotional problem
- Desire to be with caregiver(s)
- Fear or anxiety related to social situations at school
- Fear or anxiety related to a specific object or situation in school
- Gym class (e.g. showering, dressing out)
- Opportunity to engage in more enjoyable activities (e.g., free time, tv, games)
- Other (Please specify):

11. When a student engaging in excessive school absenteeism is identified, which of the following steps are taken? (Please identify the order in which they occur and then approximate percentage of cases for whom the action is taken).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Steps Taken</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Student is confronted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Parent(s) are notified of absences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Meeting with parents scheduled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Conference between teachers and parent(s).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Meeting between student and school counselor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Meeting between student and school psychologist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Referral to juvenile court system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Other (please specify):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix I (Continued)

12. Is there a school psychologist available to your school? (circle one)
   a. Yes (if yes, see 12 a-c below).
   b. No (if no, skip to question 13).

   12a. How many schools does the psychologist serve? 

   12b. How many days are they present in your school? 

   12c. How many hours are they available to your school? 

13. What interventions (if any) does the school counselor implement with students evidencing excessive school absenteeism (e.g. detention, contracting, tangible rewards for school attendance, etc.)? Please describe in the space provided below:

If you would like to make additional comments, please feel free to write on the remaining section of this page, or the inside of the back cover.

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this survey. Your time is appreciated greatly!
Appendix J: Pre-Testing Protocol

**Survey pre-testing (2-4 Participants)**
- Provide participant with informed consent – if consent is granted, continue.
- Offer survey pre-letter to participant and ask them to read it, providing instructions to think aloud as they read it
  - Probe regarding comprehension, clarity, and conciseness of the letter
- Offer survey cover letter to participant and ask them to read it, providing instructions to think aloud as they read it.
  - Probe regarding comprehension, clarity, and conciseness of the letter
  - Are return directions clear?
  - If you received this letter, would you be interested in completing the survey?
    - Provide survey – ask them to read the instructions and think aloud as they do
      - Are directions clear & concise?
      - Is survey visually appealing? Easy to navigate?
      - Are questions comprehensible, clear, and concise?
      - Are all options available (where appropriate)?

**Interview guide pre-testing (2-4 Participants)**
- Provide participant with informed consent – if consent is granted, continue.
- Offer interview cover letter to participant and ask them to read it, providing instructions to think aloud as they read it
  - Probe regarding comprehension, clarity, and conciseness of the letter
  - Are return directions clear?
  - If you received this letter, would you be interested in participating in an interview?
- Provide instructions to participant as outlined in semi-structured interview guide.
- Additional instruction is to tell the participant that after they hear a question, they will be asked additional questions (to engage them in thinking aloud):
  - What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear this question?
  - What does this question mean to you?
  - How would you respond to this question?
  - What is not clear about this question?
  - What would make this question make more sense?
Appendix K: Summary of Pre-Testing Findings

Survey
Overall, participants felt the survey was well written. Suggestions for minor changes in wording in order to simplify the language were offered.

Interview Guide
The first question “tell me your views on attendance” was too general – one participant suggested I ask “Tell me why you think kids don’t come to school.”

One participant felt the questions should flow from specific to general, as opposed to general to specific (current). It was also suggested that transitional statements be added, i.e., “Now I am going to ask you questions….”

The opening of the interview was particularly troublesome. It seemed that I could not move past this section, as I was not getting any read on a particular term or phrase that is used to describe these students. When I prompted for terms (by offering terms, asking which were familiar, which would they apply to what we are using), it led to a term that was not expected (i.e., at risk).

When I followed through with questions in this particular case, I felt that the interview was about something not related (but then again, if that is what the teacher thought of, then wouldn’t it be against social constructionism to lead her away?)

Participants would clearly differentiate between different types of students, but did not apply any of the terms I suggested to any of the students they described.

One participant suggested that I provide little descriptions of different categories of students and then ask what they might call these students. I worry that this too would be leading, as I would be offering a pre-existing construction of school refusal as opposed to finding out what it is from them.

Everyone was able to distinguish that some students regardless of everything, will miss school and enjoy doing so (truant). Then there are other students who hate to miss school but can’t stand being there (socially).

A few things I must consider:
1. The population I tested with was not a strong group. Not all were actual teachers (substitutes).
2. Teachers might think about these things different than the other categories of school personnel (i.e., specific to the general, not using terms).
Appendix L: External Review Panel

School Panelist: H. Roy Kaplan, Ph.D.

H. Roy Kaplan is the former Executive Director of the National Conference of Community and Justice (NCCJ), Tampa Bay Chapter, where he has served for fourteen years. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with a minor in public health. He served as a professor for nearly fifteen years, and currently serves as a visiting professor at the University of South Florida. He worked intensely within the school districts during his tenure as the executive director of NCCJ. He has provided diversity training and conflict resolution for personnel and students. He has served as a consultant to various school districts as well. He is skilled in both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. Dr. Kaplan possesses a unique perspective on schools as he has worked closely with them on issues such as violence prevention, racism, and other issues that relate to the social interactions within a school setting. His most recent work has been documented in his text, “Failing Grades: How Schools Breed Frustration, Anger and Violence and How to Prevent It (2004).

School Refusal: Christopher Kearney, Ph.D.

Christopher Kearney is an associate professor of clinical child psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). He also serves as the director of the UNLV Child School Refusal Clinic and Anxiety Disorders Clinic. He received his Ph.D. at the State University of New York, Albany. His research focuses on classification, assessment, and treatment of school refusal in children and adolescents. He has made significant contributions to the study of school refusal, through his research, numerous articles, and several texts. He is a proponent of bridging the gap that exists currently in this field of study.

Qualitative Methods: Maria Cabrera, MPH

Maria Cabrera is the research director for Best Start Social Marketing. She received her Master’s in public health from the University of South Florida, College of Public Health. She has vast experience in designing, coordinating, and conducting large-scale qualitative research projects. Many of the projects she oversees are for federal agencies and involve multi-site designs with multiple methods. She has much experience in a variety of qualitative methods, including interviews, elite interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews.
Appendix M: Summary of Pilot Study Findings

The pilot study was conducted in an alternate school district that the one that will be used in the main study. One of the reasons for doing this was to have a separate school district setting in the event that the district or the geographic location seems to affect school culture. Sarasota County served as the study site. Sarasota as a county is characterized by a large gap in the distribution of wealth. This was elucidated in the pilot study as an issue that can causes attendance problems among students, particularly in the high school setting. Although it cannot be stated that school districts vary in their “culture” the data would indicate this is a possibility but further study would be required. This will be useful however once the main study is initiated as a comparative point of reference.

Pilot testing closely mirrored the data collection for the main study. Interviews were conducted with the following school personnel: a school resource officer, a guidance counselor, a school nurse, an assistant principal, two attendance workers, and a district level social worker, head of dropout prevention program, and a district level guidance counselor. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. The interviews with the attendance workers were not part of the protocol, but because it was requested by the schools that these persons be interviewed, they were conducted as a courtesy.

Based on the pilot, the flow of the interview guide will vary, therefore there is no specific order of the questions in the guide. Specific instructions and reminders to the researcher will be embedded within the guide. Most of the questions were used as probes as participants described various examples of their experiences with students. In general, it would be best to have more than an hour between interviews, but this will remain flexible due to scheduling constraints.

Some of the findings from the pilot interviews included the following:

- All school personnel differentiated a variety of reasons for why students refuse school, including family dynamics, bullying, derisive teachers, students as caregivers, social niche issues, and specific to Florida, a transient population.
- When asked to describe the students who have these difficulties, school personnel responded in one of two ways – these students could be any student or they represent the gap in wealth, either very poor and minority students or very wealthy students, but rarely middle class.
- Most participants readily shared what they “thought these students look like.” Some described, with some hesitance, lower income minority students, “ugly” students, or students who physically do not fit in with the popular students.
- There seemed to be a natural divergence between the responses of some of the school personnel. For example the school resource officer and one of the attendance workers (both with law enforcement backgrounds) shared very similar views which were quite different from the views of the guidance counselor and
the other attendance worker (who had twenty years of guidance experience). For example, both delineated students as having difficulty attending school due to various similar reasons such as pleasure-seeking behaviors (fishing, theme parks, malls), left to own free will to attend school, outcast academically. They also both expressed opinions driven by the legal statutes of school attendance and truancy.

- Everyone interviewed at some point referred to students who have a difficult time with a particular teacher. They often described teachers who are “in the system” or have tenure and don’t really care about what offends students. Some personnel indicated this could be resolved simply with a schedule change for the student.

- Professional and educational experience appeared to influence their perceptions of the students. Likewise, personal experiences such as their own as a student informed the manner in which they construct their experiences with these students.

- Some participants felt that more concern was placed on students who previously had no “history” of academic or attendance problems, than on students who had some type of history of school related issues. (This finding was confirmed during the observation of a “student study team meeting” where a similar scenario was played out. This particular meeting was not in the protocol, but the school principal insisted that I observe this meeting).

- Terminology that school personnel used varied and no one brought up the term school refusal. There was however a district level person who used the term, but it was because of her contact with someone who had more information on my study. I am going to make sure that no letters mention the term school refusal. It will only include a description of the student behavior. Some other interesting “terms” used to describe the students included: “retrievable,” social niche issues, truants, disenfranchised, ESOL, unsuccessful in academics, illness, chronics, and frequent flyers, just to name a few. School personnel appear to create working terms to describe groups of students, although there was little overlap in the actual terminology used.

- District level interviews were quite different from the school level interviews. They described students in terms that are more general and had fewer examples to share than the school level personnel had. These interviews may take less time overall.

Some of the findings from the pilot observations included the following:

- After an hour, things start to look the same. Based on two raters conducting observations for 1 ½ hours, findings were almost identical. For the main study, observation time will be reduced by 50%. If there appears to be more data that will be useful, this time will be increased.

Some of the findings from the pilot survey included the following:

- Only one survey was returned and that was after a follow-up survey was sent.
Appendix M (Continued)

- Survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete.
- One question was not answered as respondent indicated they did not track that particular information.
- It was apparent (and expected) that responses in some cases will be estimates or approximations, therefore there is the potential for either underreporting or over reporting.
- Personnel who assisted in completing this survey included attendance staff and guidance counselors.
Appendix N: Identification and Intervention in School Refusal

Students who are refusing school are identified by the most obvious means available, which is their attendance record. Nowhere in the process of primary identification of students are there delineations made, with most students grouped under a general umbrella of “patterns of non-attendance.” Schools are required to track attendance; therefore, they are able to identify excessive absences. They also are required to delineate between excused and unexcused absences.

Excused absences are noted when parents provide a legitimate excuse, by calling the school or sending a doctor’s note. Unexcused absences have penalties attached after a student accrues a certain amount. Likewise, a formal, district-wide process of intervention is initiated after five and ten days of unexcused absences. More emphasis is placed on the identification of unexcused absences. This is important to note, as there may be students sliding through unidentified because their absences are excused.

Personnel emphasized that when and how a student is identified must be done carefully as the most obvious indicator of excessive absences is so vague. Participants described attendance records, patterns, and educational history as sources of information to assist in identification of school refusal. Student or parent conferences also add further insight and detail into the process. In rare cases, participants said parents would actually call the school to identify that their child was refusing to attend, mostly in cases where the student was physically refusing, defiant, or fearful, and the parent was looking for help.

*Attendance Records*

The most apparent issue with relying on attendance records is that it reveals little about the nature or reason for the absence. The actual differentiation of students does not seem to occur until after they have been identified as having a general attendance problem, unless there are overt behaviors such as crying or physical refusal to come to school. Additionally attendance records rely heavily on reliable, valid, and timely bookkeeping and review of records, which is not always possible or feasible.

Overall, all personnel cited the use of an attendance bulletin. Some described this as a list that contains the name of all absent students (both excused and unexcused), or in some cases only the excused students. Certain personnel are responsible for reviewing such bulletins at varying intervals, such as every two weeks although this did not appear to be a standard. This is a common responsibility for assistant principals.

R: Basically what’ll happen is…I mean I run a printout where what I’ll do is I’ll run a printout every couple of days of students with excessive absences.

I: And what do you mean when you say excessive?

R: Well what I’ll do is I’ll put in a date from like 3 weeks ago through today and then I want a printout of it for consecutive absences meaning two or more. And then what I’ll do is I’ll go through the list with myself and the
Appendix N (Continued)

other AP. And what we’ll do is try to identify ones that are chronically absent. And what you look for like you’re looking at one with 10 absences. That needs to be addressed (Mr. Sanders, high school assistant principal).

Other personnel who reported using the attendance bulletin to check for patterns included guidance counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. Teachers, although aware of the attendance bulletin, more often cited their own daily attendance records for recognition of patterns of absences among their students.

Identifying Patterns of Non-Attendance

Patterns of non-attendance were also reported as a common way of identifying students. Students who miss five or more days, consecutive days, or patterned days (i.e., every Monday and Friday) will catch personnel’s attention.

One school reported the use of a monitor system, in which one teacher is responsible for monitoring the attendance for several classes. This teacher places daily calls to the homes of all absent students within their designated group. The idea is to catch issues before they develop into serious problems. Few schools reported any type of identification system or protocol. One social worker indicated that, “Some schools don’t identify much. Some schools are very diligent about identifying them and other schools could care less.”

Key School Personnel and their Role in Identification

Teachers are most commonly thought of as being the first person to identify students, bearing the responsibility of identifying and referring students when an issue arises. In this aspect, teachers play a critical role as gatekeeper to student’s access to other personnel and their services. Sometimes the identification referrals go through multiple layers or sources, with the most common path going from the teacher to the guidance counselor on to the social worker.

A teacher will notify through the school guidance counselor that this student has missed 10 unexcused days…the guidance counselor will notify me (Mr. Hughes, middle school social worker).

Health assistants and nurses were considered “front line” in screening out students who are having difficulty attending or remaining in classes and refer them on to either the school psychologist or assistant principal. Social workers, guidance counselors, and school psychologists, were neither responsible nor able to conduct primary identification of students. These personnel often float between several schools, with the exception of the guidance counselors, and do not have daily contact with all students. Social workers are known as the person in charge of serious attendance issues; however, it is only after a student has been referred after multiple attempts to solve the problem. At some point, the school psychologist may be asked to evaluate or assist in what was described mostly as a
team approach. Sometimes it takes place in a more formalized process involving the use of the “Child Study Team” (see The General Process of Intervention).

Personnel’s level and manner of involvement in the process of identification and intervention varied depending upon their role in the school. It was also dependent upon other personnel “getting” others involved.

In a school setting, you’re gonna make your plan as part of a team, like I mentioned, you might get the nurse involved, you might have the guidance counselor... so you’re never working in a school as just on your own (Ms. Richard, district level).

Most participants described key personnel working together as a team to solve a problem, although some personnel have individual involvement and responsibility. At the high school level, an assistant principal usually had the role of reviewing the attendance bulletin and working with students, where as in middle school this responsibility was commonly assigned to a guidance counselor.

Personnel such as career specialists, resource officers, student affairs office secretaries, and student intervention specialists are less involved as key personnel. Sometimes a career specialist or a student intervention specialist might be asked to work with a particular student who is refusing to attempt to re-engage the student or help with goal setting. School resource officers are infrequently involved, and if so, it is by the request of the social worker. Social workers will ask the resource officer to accompany them on home visits or take students to the local truancy center. A few participants mentioned the student affairs secretaries, as they sometimes have a good idea of which students are refusing school because they see the student signing out repeatedly. One participant discussed the importance of personnel like custodians, bus drivers, and other non-instructional staff. These are considered personnel who interact with students in a less formal setting, and might see other indicators that other personnel miss.

The Process of Intervening

The identification of students who are refusing school or are developing a “pattern of non-attendance” is the first step in the process of intervention. A general protocol is used by all schools for intervening in cases of excessive absenteeism, or the cases that are considered “chronic.” The district protocol starts once a referral is made to the school social worker. This occurs after the school level protocol has been exhausted.

School Level Intervention

What happens prior to a student progressing to “chronic” is left somewhat to the schools’ discretion, although there are general steps provided by the district and state statutes that must be included. Schools submit a protocol to the district and are required to adhere to the implementation and conduction of it. Typically, this process is to be initiated with all students who are missing excessive days of school regardless of motivations or reasons for the absences. This process is important, as it should ideally
“catch” students who are having difficulty attending school, for whatever reason, before it progresses to a severe problem.

**The General Process of Intervention**

Overall, there is a general process of early intervention, but it varies from school to school by the order steps are taken, the consistency between personnel, and the assigned responsibilities. Therefore, the following description has been gleaned from the data as a generic process that unfolds within individual schools. Personnel described exceptions to the rule; therefore, deviations from this protocol are expected and are described later.

At the most basic level, all schools reportedly have a call system in place that makes daily telephone calls to the homes of students who are absent to alert parents. Although the district level participants described the telephone calling system, few schools indicated they had such a system. The first step in most descriptions of the process of intervention includes a teacher noticing a pattern of absences and alerting another person within the school, such as a guidance counselor. Some participants indicated that teachers are responsible for calling the homes of students who are absent on a daily basis, although many acknowledged that this becomes difficult with the class load most teachers have. Other participants explained that the student affairs office or the attendance clerk is responsible for this type of daily follow-up. This effort of making daily calls is mandated by both state education law and district level procedures.

After a student has five absences (unexcused or excused), a letter is generated automatically and mailed to the home. School attendance records are used to determine this. Most participants reported that the attendance clerks are responsible for the consistency and accuracy of the attendance records; however, it is reliant on teacher records. Attendance is often taken in all classes, but there is usually a designated class during the day for attendance records (i.e., homeroom or second period).

Once it is determined that a student has missed five days, the student affairs office, the attendance clerk, or the social worker mails the letter. After the five-day letter, attempts are supposed to be made to contact the parent and schedule a meeting. Additionally, an intervention form should also be initiated. After doing over 60 interviews, an assistant principal at a high school pulled out a form to show me. I had not heard of nor seen this form until this point in the study. The form is in triplicate form, and is used to document all actions taken within the process from the first letter that is mailed, the dates of all accrued absences, meetings, follow-up letters, referrals to the Child Study Team, interventions, and any outcomes. Due to the infrequent mention of this form, I am uncertain as to the consistency of its use. However, the form is from the district level and intended to be used for such documentation.

Some of these kids aren’t even going to get identified unless somebody does the paperwork to identify those children, okay, first off. If a teacher doesn’t write a referral, the assistant principal’s never going to know that they’re absent in the
Appendix N (Continued)

classroom 32 times okay. So there’s a certain amount of like…the teacher would have to be proactive (Mr. Rooney, high school guidance counselor).

A second letter is sent after 10 unexcused absences. Once absences progress past a minimum of 10 unexcused, a date is set for a Child Study Team meeting. At this meeting, a team of school personnel meets. Prior to the meeting, the student’s cumulative record as well as the student’s attendance record is reviewed. At this meeting, the team considers referring the child to the social worker. If they agree to refer the student, a form is completed (which does not require parental signature or consent), and a copy is mailed to the parent. The social worker then has the main responsibility for the case.

Social work interventions.

Social workers constitute the main personnel from student support services who are responsible for chronic cases of non-attendance. The social worker has a set series of steps that they follow as well. Once receiving the attendance referral from the Child Study Team, they may consult with other personnel within the school. Given the role as a social worker, they also interview the student, sometimes the parent, or caregiver, and conduct a home visit. This is done to assess the home environment and the family dynamics to help determine if they play in the attendance problem.

Social workers develop an attendance plan for the student, and monitor adherence to that plan. Depending upon the success of this plan, the social worker will write a final report, and determine whether further intervention is needed. If the problem does not improve, the social worker can refer to the student and their family on to the Attendance Review Board process, which is for the elementary level, or Case Staffing process, which is for the secondary level. At each of these levels, the process can lead to legal prosecution of the parents or the child. This is the most serious stage of the process, but according to most participants, it is rarely pursued, as it is lengthy and once a student is 16, it is no longer necessary.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Torrens Salemi received a Bachelor’s Degree in International Studies with a minor in Political Science in 1998 from the University of Tampa, Florida, while working at the National Conference for Community and Justice. She received her M.P.H. with a concentration in Health Education in 2001 from the University of South Florida, College of Public Health.

Entering the Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida in 2001, Ms. Torrens Salemi was active in several research projects, including an evaluation of the Florida Coordinated School Health pilot program, and Sarasota County’s Demonstration Grant “Counseling for Today for Learning Tomorrow.” She has coauthored two publications, one in the American Journal of Health Education, and another in the Florida Public Health Review. She currently serves on the Health Council of West Central Florida, the local School Health Advisory Committee, and the Florida School Health and Education Consortium.