A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT WHEN DEALING WITH THEIR CHILDREN’S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT WHEN DEALING WITH THEIR CHILDREN’S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE (232 pp.)

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Truancy, which represented 34% of all juvenile status offense cases filed in the United States in 2002, is a major indicator for at-risk students dropping out of school. Researchers have suggested that the development of effective family–school relationships may be a key to curbing truancy.

The participants in this study were six parents of students identified with a pattern of chronic absenteeism and whose absences the parent condoned. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to hear the stories of parents whose children engaged in chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of how parents experienced the school environment when dealing with issues related to regarding their children’s attendance.

The data revealed that parents’ perceptions of the school environment derived not from a single positive or negative experience but instead from a confluence of experiences. Parents’ perceptions were also influenced by a multitude of external forces with the potential to damage the social environment of the child and family until it became a toxic one. For some parents, the more negative and challenging these forces were in their lives, the more they adversely affected the way they experienced the school environment.
School district leaders can address parents’ negative perceptions of schools and work to counter the effects of socially toxic environments by developing policies to welcome families to the school community, promote inclusive home–school collaboration, and provide safety nets for at-risk children. Above all, school leaders must avoid the assumption that current means of communicating with families are effective.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Freidman (2005) wrote of a flat world, he referred to a shift in global competition and the skills that future workers will need in order to compete in a global economy. School administrators and teachers often ask how they can cultivate a desire in students to learn these skills when they struggle to persuade some of them even to attend school. During my 13 years as a school administrator, colleagues have blamed parents for what they perceive as their failure to send their children to school. I have listened to teachers who told me that parents simply do not value education. In addition, I have engaged in conversations with parents who have told me that their children do not want to attend school because teachers and administrators do not care about them. At some point in my career, I thought, “Why does this strained relationship exist between parents and administrators regarding school attendance issues?” According to Chang and Romero (2008), “Schools and communities have a choice: [They] can work together early on to ensure families get their children to class consistently, or [they] can pay later for failing to intervene before problems are more difficult and costly to ameliorate” (p. 3).

Few researchers, however, have contributed to an understanding of the way parents experience the school environment when dealing with their children’s attendance, especially when dealing with chronic absenteeism.

The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of parents whose children engage in chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of how they experience
the school environment when dealing with their children’s attendance. As I investigated parents’ experiences with the school system related to their children’s absenteeism, I sought to develop an understanding of those experiences that influenced those experiences. I hoped that this understanding would help K–12 administrators develop and implement policies to strengthen the bond between school and family in order to improve communication and relationships.

As a 22-year veteran working with students and families as a juvenile corrections officer, educator, and school administrator, I have listened to teachers and principals talk about the effects of chronic student absences on student achievement and the dropout rate. As a presenter on student attendance and dropout prevention, I have gained knowledge from speaking with researchers, school administrators, truant officers, and juvenile court judges from the United States, England, and Canada (Swartz, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Overwhelmingly, truancy and dropout professionals have shared the struggles they faced in working with parents and students to improve student attendance. These school officials chronicled examples of parents who provided notes to excuse their children’s absences from school, notes that school officials said were often neither valid nor legitimate or were simply fabrications.

What made these experiences important to me as a researcher was that “skipping school” was a normal and accepted part of my own childhood. Although I understand instances when parents permit the occasional absence from school, I cannot help but wonder why some parents permit their children to miss many days of school and what
school officials can do to improve home–school communication in order to reduce the overall number of days some students are absent from school.

**Framing the Problem**

According to a recent government report, four of five public high school students graduate from high school within four years of beginning ninth grade (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). With a 2012 national graduation rate of 80%, this was very good news; however, this statistic included largely White, middle- and upper-class segments of America. Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students, and those with disabilities experienced a graduation rate much lower, specifically 69%, 73%, 72%, and 69%, respectively (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) found that between 6% and 23% of U.S. children are absent from school 10% of the school year (p. 16); in other words between five and 7.5 million students each year fail to attend school regularly (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 17). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) reported that 59%–65% of students who dropped out reported skipping school during the year before they did so. Clearly, truancy and chronic absenteeism have a negative effect on both a child’s academic performance and life outcome.

**Types and Effects of School Absenteeism**

School personnel have been left to determine district criteria for excused and unexcused absences (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). According to the National Center for School Engagement (2006) the word *truancy* is a legal term often used in relation to juvenile court. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) defined *truancy* “as a certain number or
certain frequency of unexcused absences” (p. 7). The Ohio Revised Code (ORC) does not define good attendance but instead refers to truancy as a legal term. ORC 3321.19 allows each board of education to determine when a child has been truant and defines the terms habitual and chronic truant. ORC 215.011 defines a habitual truant as follows:

any child of compulsory school age who is absent without legitimate excuse for absence from the public school the child is supposed to attend for five or more consecutive school days, seven or more school days in one school month, or twelve or more school days in a school year. (130th Ohio General Assembly, 2014, p. B19)

ORC 2152.02 defines a chronic truant as

any child of compulsory school age who is absent without legitimate excuse for absence from the public school the child is supposed to attend for seven or more consecutive school days, ten or more school days in one school month, or fifteen or more school days in a school year. (129th Ohio General Assembly, 2012, p. D)

The legal definition is, however, only one way in which this term has been defined. Reid (2010) explained that the operational definition of truancy has varied from institution to institution and from study to study.

One type of school absenteeism is incurred by a small number of students, who for psychological reasons suffer extreme types of emotional reactions to attending school. Researchers (Corville-Smith, 1995; Elliot, 1999; Heyne, King, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001)
have referred to these students as school refusers. They rarely display disruptive, antisocial behavior or delinquency; aware of their absences, their parents may not realize or understand the severity of the problem.

In contrast, students with irregular attendance patterns often miss school without their parents’ knowledge. Evidence has suggested that these students lack a general interest in school and schoolwork and often participate in disruptive behaviors that lead to violations of the school code of conduct and the law (Corville-Smith, 1995; Elliott, 1999; Reid, 1999). In these cases, once the parent is made aware of the issue, a partnership is generally established with the school to improve the student’s attendance. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) asserted that statistics on truancy actually underestimate the total number of student absences.

Yet another group of students is labeled as poor attenders, whose absences are sometimes referred to as parent-condoned truancy, a phenomenon most difficult for school administrators to tackle because of the parents’ complicity in perpetuating this type of absence. Parents who condone absences often fail to send their children to school because they feel they can no longer make them attend (Reid, 1999).

The difference between parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and other forms of chronic absenteeism is the parents’ complicity. According to Sheppard (2005), “by year 8, most pupils admitted to trying to get their parents’ agreement to their missing occasional days from school” (p. 24). She showed that children tested their parents’ reactions to requests to miss school to determine whether they would insist that they go to
school. Sheppard suggested that the responses of parents to these requests derive from their attitudes toward education and their experiences with parent–child relationships in previous years. She stated that both expected and past parent reactions to absence from school were major determinants in a student’s future attempts to miss days of school. Combating this type of truancy is very difficult because of the parent’s complicity in the truant behavior; however, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) stated that the reason for a child’s absences is irrelevant. “The detrimental impacts of missing school occur if a student misses because of illness, suspension, the need to care for a family member or any other reason” (p. 7). Whether the reason a child is absent from school is due to truancy or chronic absenteeism is immaterial. A child who misses any day of school suffers the consequence of that absence.

For the purposes of this study, I used the term chronic absenteeism to denote the broadest use of both terms (truancy and chronic absenteeism) except when the legal definition of truancy is necessary. Here, the term chronic absenteeism refers to a combination of both parent-excused and unexcused absences. It includes neither those excused absences that may result from documented appointments involving doctor visits, counseling, court appointments, funerals, or other appointments excused with official documentation from an approved organization or a professional nor absences resulting from family vacations.

While investigating chronic absenteeism, I was reminded of experiences I encountered with parents regarding their children’s absences when I was an assistant
principal, charged with dealing with student absenteeism. I remember one parent, the wife of a physician, who negotiated her daughter’s and son’s absences with me. She wanted to take her children out of school to travel with her husband, who was to attend a conference in South Dakota. She described to me the educational benefits her children would experience during this trip. She spoke about the historical, cultural, and scientific exposure her children would receive, and how this type of educational experience was more valuable than the one they would receive sitting in the classroom. She explained that in the past she home-schooled her children because of roadblocks she encountered from school administrators when she tried to negotiate absences and that she would do that again if I failed to relent. Thinking about this experience, I compared it to another experience I had with a mother who wished to keep her daughter at home half a day each day so that she could baby sister and take care of her aging grandmother while the mother worked one of two jobs she kept in order to support her family. Although I eventually excused the absences of the children of the doctor’s wife as a district-approved family vacation, eventually I had to file truancy charges against the child whose mother requested that her daughter be permitted half-day excused absences in order to take care of her family members. I cannot help but wonder whether a better understanding of cultural capital or a more collaborative style of leadership may have helped me find alternate solutions to help families dealing with chronic absenteeism. Did the doctor’s wife’s access to cultural capital influence my ability to work with her regarding her children’s absences? Did the lack of access to cultural capital by the mother of the girl...
who was needed at home influence my decision to file charges against her daughter?

With regard to the phenomenon of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism, two factors are helpful when developing policies or practices that affect families as well as students: (a) understanding how cultural capital might frame the decision-making process of a school administrator and (b) employing a consider leadership style which includes all stakeholders, especially parents. Both of these topics are covered later in this chapter and thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

To be effective, school attendance policymakers must take into account clear definitions in regard to what constitutes excused and unexcused absences as well as procedures to encourage communication and provide assistance to families in need (National Center for School Engagement, 2006). In working to address circumstances that contribute to chronic absenteeism, however, few school professionals have agreed on the number of absences that designate a chronically absent child. The occurrence of chronic absenteeism is defined differently, not only from state to state and district to district but also among administrators of the same district (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In addition, researchers (Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Reimer & Dimock, 2005) have suggested that during a child’s early years in school, parents control student attendance; but as the chronically absent child grows older and the chronic absenteeism reaches a persistent state, many parents find they no longer have control over their children’s school attendance (Reid, 2000). The generally recognized definition of chronic absenteeism among researchers is missing 10% of a school regardless of the reason
(Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). At this point, a common understanding is needed of (a) the impact of chronic absenteeism on students and society and (b) the circumstances that contribute to excessive absenteeism.

Impact of Chronic Absenteeism on Society

An understanding of the effect that chronic absenteeism has on society requires knowledge of the impact that school failure has on a population. Chronic absenteeism is a contributing influence for students who are at risk of dropping out of school (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004; Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). Data have suggested that on average, high school dropouts earn less than their graduating counterparts do; they contribute less tax money to the state and federal governments and make up a larger proportion of those citizens incarcerated (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). A sense of alienation causes a child to miss excessive days of school and then later leave school all together (Gonzales, Richards, & Seeley, 2002; Morse & Christenson, 2004; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). Thus, this trend becomes a cycle affecting not only the chronically absent child but also future generations of the family in a self-perpetuating legacy (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005).

Across the United States in 2002, of the 1.6 million judicial cases filed against juveniles, 224,000 of those were filed for truancy (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). That number represents 14% of all juvenile cases filed that year. Between 1985 and 2002, truancy cases constituted 34% of all status offenses handled by juvenile courts across the
country (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006); however, the impact of chronic absenteeism does not stop there.

**Impact of Chronic Absenteeism on Students**

As early as third grade, poor attendance is a strong indicator in identifying the potential risk for a child to become a school dropout (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Dropouts are three and a half times more likely than graduates to be convicted of a crime, and identifiable strong links have been found between truancy and daytime burglary and vandalism (Eastman, Cooney, O’Connor, & Small, 2007; Gonzales et al., 2002; Mogulescu & Segal, 2002; Reid, 2010; Thurlow, Sinclair, Johnson, 2002).

Researchers from the National Center for Children in Poverty (2008) found that students who miss 10% or more of the school year are more likely to suffer from poor school performance in later grades. Notably, truancy is not the cause of this suffering. Chronic absenteeism is “an indicator of other problems. When students aren’t in school, [school personnel] need to understand why they stay away before [they] can effect solutions” (Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office, 2000, p. 2).

In a study conducted to explore indicators that may predict student failure on state high school graduation exams, Nichols (2003) found a “consistently strong negative correlation among English, math and reading scores and yearly average absences, indicating that standardized test scores of these students vary inversely with their average yearly absences” (p. 116). Nichols collected data for students from six different high schools, concentrating on students from the graduating classes of 2000, 2001, and 2002.
who failed the state of Indiana minimum required proficiencies during their sophomore year as demonstrated by their graduation test scores. In reviewing the data of 6,420 students from the 1997–98 school year, Nichols identified one consistent characteristic: Most failing students averaged more than 10 absences per year as far back as sixth grade, and this rate of absences increased every year.

Researchers have found that students chronically absent from school one year are likely to continue their pattern of absence from school over multiple years (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), which can have a compounding effect on their education and life outcomes that is difficult to overcome. Kindergartners who miss 10% of the school year exhibit a lower ability to perform academically in first grade. Chronic absenteeism in a lower grade reduces the academic achievement of a student in subsequent grades. In addition, a strong correlation exists between chronic absenteeism in sixth graders and later dropping out of school.

Chronic absenteeism not only affects the absent student but also those who attend regularly. When a child is absent from school, teachers must make time to review missed academic content with them, check missing homework, and discuss requirements for upcoming activities. Having to do so contributes to a loss of instructional time for all students (Chang & Romero, 2008). “It is important to consider the likely detrimental impact caused by the constant disruption to the learning environment for regularly attending peers and the impact of unpredictable classroom dynamics on teachers’ working conditions” (Chang & Romero, 2008, p. 7).
Contributing Factors

Researchers (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Corville-Smith, 1995; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004; Reid, 2000; Sheverbush & Smith, 2000; Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006; Wesley & Duttweiler, 2005) have identified influences known to contribute to poor school attendance, parent-condoned chronic absenteeism, and truancy. Those influences derived from family, school, economic, and student factors.

Family factors. Circumstances within the family that contribute to chronic truancy include lack of parental guidance, violence, drug and alcohol use, and attitudes toward education (Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). These circumstances can cause such stress on families that the home environment becomes toxic (Garbarino, 1998b). Researchers have suggested that chronic absenteeism “may run in families” (Mueller, Giacomazzi & Stoddard, 2006, p. 215). Mueller, Giacomazzi, and Stoddard (2006) found that one third of truancy court cases studied involved “multiple sibling referrals from the same families” (p. 215). Such instances often indicate other significant family issues contributing to the absenteeism, such as a lack of caregiver for younger siblings or older adults, a lack of transportation, or child employment to ameliorate a family financial situation. Sheverbush and Smith (2000) suggested that despite family factors, parents must be empowered with all the resources, information, and support available to assure that their children attend school.
School factors. School circumstances that affect student attendance include the following: the perception that school is boring and irrelevant or that faculty members do not care, a poor school climate, a loss of connection resulting from suspensions or other absences, and inconsistent attendance procedures (Baker et al., 2001; Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Sheverbush & Smith, 2000). Osher, Sandler, and Nelson (2001) found that “School is frequently an aversive place for many, marked by staff and student hostility” (p. 131).

Economic factors. Economic circumstances affecting attendance include poverty or lack of employment opportunities for families, high transience rates, and the lack of childcare (Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). Smink and Heilbrunn (2005) found that “When parents must work long hours, leaving home before their children go to school and returning long after children come home, it is difficult to monitor school attendance” (p. 31). Enforcing school attendance requirements and meeting family needs are often incompatible.

Student factors. Finally, student circumstances that contribute to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism are poor academic performance, the inability to make up schoolwork and subsequently falling behind, lack of social competence, and medical or mental health issues (Baker et al., 2001; Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).
**Symptom of a Greater Problem**

Any one of the factors noted in the previous section can contribute to poor school attendance. When multiple factors are in play for students and families, however, the problem is compounded when poor student attendance leads to issues of chronic absenteeism and its many consequences. Researchers have indicated that parent-condoned chronic absenteeism may, in fact, be a symptom of some greater problem. Sheverbush and Smith (2000) proposed that once the symptom is understood, the changes needed to alleviate the problem come into focus.

Chang and Romero (2008) conducted a study to investigate the extent to which a parent’s prior experience with the educational system contributes to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. They speculated that some parents who experienced academic failure and alienation in school when they were children might be reluctant to send their own children to school because they view school as a negative experience. Chang and Romero contended that parents may acknowledge the importance of an education to ensure the future success of their children but do not develop the skills that would enable them as parents to assist their children in taking advantage of learning opportunities or the school in providing them.

Notably, some researchers disagree with the premise that a parents’ attitudes toward education have an effect on a child’s decision to be chronically absent or a parent’s decision to condone the absence. Brown (1987) reported, “There is little direct evidence to suggest that hostile parental attitudes played a large part in influencing the
attitudes of the truants” (p. 41). Mitigating circumstances for some parents’ hostile view or failure to support school policy or practices has more to do with teachers’ misconceptions of what “interest in education is and how it is manifested” (Brown, 1987, p. 42). Parents as well as some researchers have suggested that the perceptions children have of the way their teachers view them and their efforts have a stronger effect on truancy behavior than parents’ perceptions (Reid, 1985).

**Attributes of Parent-Condoned Chronic Absenteeism**

The onset of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism was documented in children as young as seven years of age; however, the average age for this type of behavior was generally around 12 for girls and 14 for boys (Reid, 2000). Reid (2000) found that girls were two to three times more likely than boys to engage in parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. Although some suffered from incidents of bullying, others did not. Surveys of some students engaging in this type of chronic absenteeism indicated that they did not find the curriculum in place at their school to be sufficiently stimulating; others indicated that the cause of their chronic absenteeism was indifferent school personnel (Brown, 1987; Reid, 1985, 2000).

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of parents whose children engaged in parent-condoned chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of parents’ experience with the school environment when dealing with their child’s attendance. From parents’ perspectives I examined the behavioral process that occurred
in parent–child negotiations over school attendance in an effort to identify ways that school personnel can help parents improve student attendance and foster better home–school relationships. I looked for words or developing themes in the interviews with parents that suggested ways that school administrators can facilitate open communication with regard to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism.

Identifying possible barriers to family–school relationships that contribute to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and recognizing potential roadblocks that hamper efforts to curtail student absences were, therefore, important in this study. Sheppard (2005) noted, “Further studies investigating the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that occur in the parent–child negotiation over school attendance would provide more information on the development and nature of attendance difficulties” (p. 25). Thus, this research has the potential to help school administrators develop policy and targeted efforts to improve home–school relationships.

**Research Question**

An examination of chronic absenteeism and the family–school relationship can reveal the negative effect that some school policies and practices have on this relationship. Parents are sometimes unaware of the impact that parent-condoned chronic absenteeism has on a child’s progress in school or the detrimental effect that continued absences have on a child’s capacity to learn over time. In many instances, parents may not know the policies that dictate how an absence can be excused or where to find help in resolving attendance issues. Lareau and Shumar (1996) reported that policies threatening
court sanction with little effort to communicate contribute to the adversarial relationship
that sometimes develops between educators and parents. Lareau and Shumar indicated
that communication is sometimes lacking between the home and school environment or
more specifically between parents and school administrators. Listening to parents’
stories related to parent–child negotiations over school attendance and parents’ current
and prior experiences in the school setting regarding their children’s attendance were,
therefore, important to this study. The tool chosen for its effectiveness in determining
whether school policies contribute to chronic absenteeism was qualitative research. My
primary research question was as follows: What are parents’ experiences in the school
environment and how do they contribute to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism?

In investigating the research question, I found that addressing certain
subquestions related to this inquiry was also important. Previous researchers (Chang &
Romero; 2008; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Räty, 2007) alluded to the influence that prior
educational experience plays in a parent’s decision-making process. Some researchers
(Lareau & Shumar; 1996) have suggested that a parent’s past negative experiences with
education may contribute to the development of adversarial relationships in their
children’s current situation. Other researchers (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999;
Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Lareau & Weininger, 2003) have suggested that the process by
which a parent engages in negotiations with a child over school attendance can contribute
negatively or positively to the child’s attendance issues. Subquestions in this inquiry
included the following:
What influence do parent–child negotiations play when a child attempts to miss school with parent permission?

Do barriers in the family–school relationship interfere with a parent’s ability to follow school attendance policies with their children?

Are parents’ perceptions derived from previous interactions with school personnel?

**Key Terms**

The key terms defined below are provided in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding of issues discussed in this inquiry.

*Truancy* is a term that refers to the absences of a juvenile from school without legal permission or authority (NCSE, 2006).

*Chronic absenteeism* is defined as absence from school for 10% or more of the school year and includes both excused and unexcused absences (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

*School refusers* are defined as children who stay at home with their parents’ permission because of a psychological disorder known as school phobia. These children suffer from severe emotional distress when forced to attend school (Corville-Smith, 1995; Elliot, 1999; Heyne, King, Tonge & Cooper, 2001).

*School-wise* is defined as someone who feels a sense of belonging at school and experiences success in school. This term emerged from data gathered during this research.
Parent-condoned absenteeism is the term applied to absences approved by a parent for reasons including the following: (a) a parent using a child to care for other family members, (b) work patterns causing difficulty for the family to ensure the child’s attendance at school, (c) a child working to support the family, (d) a parent acquiescing to a child’s request to stay home, (e) a parent unable to control the child, and (f) absence for the purpose of shopping or reasons other than illness or psychological issues (Cauldwell School Attendance Policy, 2014; Corville-Smith, 1995; Elliott, 1999; Reid, 2010).

Status offense is a term that designates behavior that violates the law only if committed by a person of juvenile status. “Such behaviors include running away from home, ungovernability (being beyond the control of parents or guardians), truancy, and underage drinking” (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 191).

Cultural capital denotes knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that increase an individual’s status in society. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system (Bourdieu, 1986).

Distributed leadership denotes leadership that encourages and facilitates a shared community undertaking by actively engaging in dialogue with stakeholders for the purpose of working toward a common moral purpose (Waterhouse, 2007).

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) some qualitative researchers have asserted that qualitative inquiries cannot be judged using the canon or criteria used to
evaluate quantitative research. The same can be said for various types of grounded theory as well. Formal grounded theory “emerges from the analytical examination of the phenomena in a variety of disparate situations [and has a more certain] predictive ability [than substantive grounded theory, which is grounded theory that] refers to an empirical area of sociological inquiry and is specific to groups and place” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 246). Charmaz (2006) extended this idea, nothing that, grounded theories emerge from past and present interaction with people, perspectives, and research practices. The current qualitative research deals specifically with the experiences of the participants of this study. Because I investigated the experiences of parents at one high school in this constructivist grounded theory inquiry, attesting to its predictive ability with other parents in other high schools, school districts, or settings in which parents’ own experiences guide their behaviors when making decisions about their children’s experiences would be problematic because the analysis “is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131).

Many reasons may account for a student’s pattern of chronic absenteeism, including family, school, economic, and student factors. Some researchers (Corville-Smith, 1995; Elliot, 1999) have taken a psychological–psychiatric approach to this issue; others (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) have taken a legal approach. In this study I aimed to develop an understanding of the experiences of parents in the school environment with regard to the parent-condoned chronic absenteeism of their children. Identifying potential roadblocks in the parent–school collaboration
process, specifically the role that parents’ experiences in the school setting plays in
care. Specifically, the role that parents’ experiences in the school setting plays in
parent–child negotiations over school attendance, has the potential to contribute to a
framework upon which administrators can build true partnerships with families.

Although children are absent from school for various reasons, the relationship
between parent–child negotiations and parents’ experiences with personnel in the school
setting have not been fully addressed in the current literature. Several researchers
(Corville-Smith, 1995; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Sheppard, 2005) have acknowledged the
importance of looking at this particular relationship. Because the qualitative nature of
this study limits its generalizability, caution is appropriate when applying the findings to
other home–school relationships. Strauss and Corbin (1998) addressed the issue of
generalizability, asserting that the “purpose of theory-building methodology is to build
theory” (p. 267). Thus, I have endeavored to explore the process that occurs when a
parent condones a child’s absence. The findings from this study should be used as a
framework with the potential to help school administrators understand this process and
develop ways to improve family–school relationships.

This study was designed neither to address issues of school phobia nor issues of
truancy in which parents clearly do not condone their children’s unexcused absences nor
chronic absenteeism resulting from extended illnesses experienced by the absent child.
My hope was to initiate conversations at school administrative meetings, administrative
workshops, and school policy decision-making sessions in order to foster a better
understanding of the importance of building relationships with parents.
Notably, the perceptions shared by the participants were those of parents, not students; therefore, the data may have produced biased conclusions. All parent participants were mothers despite the invitations (see Appendix A) mailed to all parent contacts, when available; only mothers agreed to participate. Male participants’ perceptions of events might have differed from those of female participants. The study also lacked data associated with the perceptions of school personnel. Although parent participants discussed frustrations regarding interaction with school personnel, specifically the lack of communication, acknowledging that school personnel may have different perspectives on the issues addressed in this study is important.

Significance

Failure to address the issue of relationship building in the context of family–school relationships in training programs for teachers and administrators will result in the further alienation of parents. According to Brown (1987) parent perceptions and the prevention of chronic absenteeism have been heretofore unaddressed in teacher preparation programs, the logical setting for exploring parents’ attitudes toward education. Brown suggested that research including parents’ voices is vital to combating parent-condoned truancy.

The literature currently lacks information about the parents of truants; in fact, little or no published research has been based on actual discussions with such parents. A thorough examination of parental opinion as well as of its source and constancy is sorely needed (p. 43). The development of theory based on the experiences of parents whose
children are chronically absent from school has the potential to shed light on parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and inform administrative practices for dealing with this type of attendance problem. During my years of working with principals in Ohio, I have seen no preparation programs designed to help them address student attendance or reference to parent–school relationship building in more than only general terms.

I am not suggesting that parents’ attitudes toward school or educators’ attitudes toward chronically absent students and their families cause parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. That is for researchers to determine; however, I believe that continuing to ignore parent-condoned chronic absenteeism in school districts across the US is unconscionable. Parents have expressed feelings of alienation from the education process and often feel discounted by school personnel. Current researchers (Brown, 1987; Lareau & Shumar, 1996) have suggested that little progress has been made in understanding reasons that efforts to foster effective family–school relationships are weak and failing in areas where parents have few social resources.

The current study has the potential to enhance understanding of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and behaviors that contribute to the current failure to achieve productive family–school relationships. One of my goals in this research was to use results to equip parents, teachers, and school administrators with tools to reverse the current trend of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism with a focus on identifying aspects in the relationships between families and schools that contribute to the cycle of truancy.
Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the context of this qualitative research study. The problem was framed with information on the types and effects of school absenteeism, followed by a brief history and explanation of the impact of chronic absenteeism and truancy on society and students and a discussion of the influences and circumstances that contribute to chronic absenteeism and truancy. Next, the purpose of the study was laid out, and the research goal and questions were introduced. Definitions of terms used in this inquiry were included to help ensure that the reader and I share a common understanding of their meaning. Clarification of the limits of this study was provided in order to frame the predictive capability of findings in explaining what might happen in a similar situation where the theoretical viewpoint resembles that of this researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, the significance of this research lies in its potential to inform administrative practice in an effort to improve family–school relationships.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter, I first provide an examination of previous research on at-risk youth as well as parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. Next, I summarize research on the manner in which experiences of parents with the school or school personnel may influence their perception of their children’s school experience. Then, I address the role that cultural capital or the hidden injuries of class may play in decision making by parents regarding their children’s education. Fourth, a review of the literature dealing with the role that parent–child negotiations have in home–school relationships is provided. I also review student perspectives on engagement as well as environments that can be toxic to youth development. An examination of the potential influence that educational leadership has in improving home–school relationships concludes this chapter.

At-Risk Youth

Throughout this study, I refer to at-risk youth; thus, defining the term and framing it with the literature is important. In a study of strength-based counseling, Smith (2006) stated the term at-risk youth has typically been associated with youth from inner city, disadvantaged, and minority households. This is a dangerous approach, based on stereotypes and slanting the way researchers and institutions identify those most at risk while leaving an entire group of students unidentified and unserved. Smith correctly pointed out that at-risk youth come from disadvantaged and affluent homes, from every
ethnic background, and from rural, urban, and suburban communities. “At-risk youth are defined as young people whose life situations place them in danger of future negative events. Such youth have personal characteristics or environmental conditions that predict the onset, continuity, or escalation of problematic behavior” (Smith, 2006, p. 14). When youth find themselves with large amounts of unstructured time, struggling in unsupportive or toxic environments, or in “high-risk environmental conditions” (Smith, 2006, p. 14), they become, according to Dryfoos, “vulnerable to the negative effects of school failure” (as cited in Smith, 2006, p. 14). Researchers who seek solutions to address the needs of at-risk youth and families must be wary of focusing on one particular stereotype.

In an analysis of research on students at risk for dropping out of school, Jerald (2006) found that “dropping out is a process that begins when students fall behind academically, after which they become frustrated and disengaged from school” (p. 16). According to Jerald all students appear to struggle during transitions from one school to another, for example, from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. Students who experience poor achievement in previous years struggle more than others during transitional periods. In his review of research conducted in Philadelphia high schools (see also Neild & Farley, 2004), Jerald found that the freshman year in high school plays a significant role in on-time graduation partly because of risk factors eighth graders carry with them to high school, including patterns of poor attendance, course failures, and low reading and math scores. In fact, researchers found that poor attendance
during the first 30 days of ninth grade is a more accurate indicator of likelihood of graduation than any factor that surfaced during eighth grade, including test scores, age, and academic failure (Jerald, 2006, p. 17). Although school personnel can assess which factors to use in identifying possible at-risk students at their schools, poor school attendance continues to be a strong indicator of students at risk for dropping out of school.

**Parent-Condoned Chronic Absenteeism**

As noted above, parent-condoned chronic absenteeism is one of the more problematic types of student absences confronting school administrators, who rely on the truthfulness and accuracy of the parents who excuse their children from school or who send notes to school stating the child was ill or absent because of a family emergency (Corville-Smith, 1995; Reid, 1999, 2006b). The legitimacy typically afforded to the parent excuses makes this type of absence difficult to track as far as chronic absenteeism data is concerned because of the masking of the actual reason for the absences (Reid, 1999, 2006b). In an effort to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism, increase school funding, and avoid unpleasant confrontations with parents, school administrators are often reluctant to pursue issues of parent-condoned absences; thus, the phenomenon often goes unreported (Reid, 1999, 2006b), contributing to a lack of research in this area.

Parents provide illness as an excuse for their child when they know she or he is not ill for various reasons (Corville-Smith, 1995; Reid, 1999). In a case study conducted by Reid (1999), some parents said they were unsure whether or not their children were ill,
so they acquiesced to their requests to stay home from school. In a paper on the
treatment of school refusers, school phobia, and truancy, Elliott (1999) reported that
parents sometimes keep a child home to take care of a family member, to perform chores,
or to babysit.

In her exploratory study, Sheppard (2005) investigated reasons that some students
choose to miss school. Using questionnaires designed to measure attitudes, perceptions,
and parent–child interaction regarding school absences, she surveyed 209 students aged
12–13 years old to discern how often they attempted to miss school, why they did so,
how parents reacted to these requests, how often they missed school without parent
permission, and what consequence they expected if a parent discovered the absence. She
conducted individual interviews with 35 of those 209 students to clarify questionnaire
responses and discovered that expected or actual parent reaction to the request to miss
school was the most influential determinant of how frequently the student attempted to
miss school.

Although many parents and children agreed that an education is important in a
person’s later ability to secure a well-paying job, some parents attributed the disconnect
with school to prior issues or conflicts with school personnel (Corville-Smith, 1995;
Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Reid,
1999; Sheppard, 2005). “Parents often fear school authorities, perceiving school as a
potential threat in their lives” (Lareau & Shumar, 1996, p. 33). Unfortunately, a small
number of parents are simply indifferent about their children’s school attendance (Reid, 2000). Thus, the pattern of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism becomes entrenched.

In order to study this phenomenon, a researcher must (a) understand the role that a parent’s prior experience plays in her or his decision to comply with school attendance polices, (b) recognize the behavior process that occurs in the parent–child negotiation over school attendance, and (c) investigate the type of relationship some parents have with school personnel (Lareau & Shumar, 1996).

**Parents’ Prior Educational Experiences**

Räty (2007) hypothesized that parents’ memories of their own primary school experiences influence their perceptions of their children’s school experiences; for example, if parents had positive views of their primary school experience, they would have a similar positive view of their children’s school experience at the same age. Referred to as an experience-anchored orientation, Räty posited that the ways in which parents evaluated their recollections of their own school experience was an accurate predictor of how they would evaluate their satisfaction with their children’s educational experience. This research was a follow up to a previous inquiry (Räty, Jaukka, & Kasanen, 2004), in which the researchers studied overall parent satisfaction of the children’s first-year experience in Finnish schools. Although the researchers found that in general parents were satisfied with their child’s educational experience, working-class parents’ responses suggested that the Finnish school system appeared to favor middle-class families. The similarity in the school systems of Finland and the United States is
“parents [are viewed] more as consumers of, rather than participants in, education” (Räty et al., 2004, p. 463). This perception can have a negative effect on parents’ view of the educational experience of their children.

Parents may attach negative or positive feelings to their children’s educational experience based on their own experiences or on those relayed by other parents. Millar and Millar (1996) conducted three quantitative studies on the effects of direct and indirect experience on affectively charged attitudes that could predict affectively driven behavior. They proposed that although some behaviors evoke cognitive responses, other types of behavior evoke affective responses. Using various types of puzzles, they found that participants who had direct experience with the puzzles produced more affective statements about them than participants who had indirect experiences with them. By contrast, participants who had indirect experiences with the puzzles produced more cognitive statements regarding their experiences. In their second study Millar and Millar hypothesized—and their research later supported—the notion that attitudes that participants form through direct experiences with objects predict affectively driven behaviors. In the final study in this research article, Millar and Millar investigated Fazio’s findings (in Fazio & Zanna, 1981) that attitudes formed through direct experiences are more accessible in memory and more likely to be invoked in situations when the object is present. They confirmed Fazio’s findings that situations associated with the affect can act as a prompt for the retrieval of attitudes linked with the affect. A parent’s attitudinal response towards a child’s educational experience is, therefore, more
likely to the result of a direct experience the parent had with the same or similar educational experience than an indirect experience relayed through a second party. Lareau and Weininger (2003), however, stated that a family’s access to cultural capital also plays a role in their educational experiences.

**Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu introduced the concept of cultural capital in the early 1970s. In his work on cultural reproduction, he proposed that the dominant social class uses its position to impose a system that perpetuates its station in that society; furthermore, the education system, which is under the control of the dominant class, is the vehicle for the inculcation of its values and ideas (Bourdieu, 1973). He argued that this occurs by way of the value placed on certain cultural experiences extolled by “highbrow” society (see Lareau & Weininger, 2003) and the manner in which they are referenced or expressed in the education system (Bourdieu, 1973). Hence, those with the means to decipher the cultural codes are the only ones who can fully enjoy the benefits of such an educational experience.

A system Bourdieu (1973) called the habitus acts as an intermediary between certain cultural structures and practices. The educational system, such as the one he studied in France, was the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation; thus, those in control of decision making in the system determine which cultural experiences are worthy of sharing over time. These decision makers, according to Bourdieu’s theory, determine which cultural experiences are promulgated; the social
class associated with these cultural experiences is then elevated and therefore perpetuated. Those who are able to assimilate these cultural experiences have a greater propensity to be socially elevated, and those who have difficulty assimilating them are forced to take a lower position in the cultural and social hierarchy.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) defined cultural capital as “knowledge of or competence with ‘highbrow’ aesthetic culture [as] distinct from other important forms of knowledge or competence” (p. 567), such as technical skills or human capital. They contended that these highbrow interests are an essential aspect of the dominant class and constitute the “art of living” (p. 578) associated with this class, often defined by its members’ “taste in home furnishings, clothing, food preferences, musical interests, and other cultural dimensions” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 578).

Lareau and Weininger (2003) contended that educators evaluate and judge students and their families using formal and informal means; in other words educators assess their cultural capital. Second, they argued that students and families enter the realm of education with varying degrees of skills and competencies that can assist or impede their ability to conform to the expectations of the educational system (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). “Students and parents are also differently endowed with the knowledge and skills that enable them to influence the way that [expectations] are applied” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 588). Prior to their 2003 research Lareau (in Lareau & Horvat, 1999) included the following examples in her definition of cultural capital of parents: their vocabularies, sense of entitlement, time, mode of transportation to
and from school and school events, arrangements for child care needed to allow them to attend school functions, and their ability to use social capital, such as social networks that include other parents. Lareau and Horvat (1999) stated that “social class provides cultural capital when it increases parents’ compliance with the standards of the dominant culture” (p. 42). Thus, one might speculate that the ability or lack thereof to use cultural and social capital continues to affect the home–school relationship.

In a case study on the involvement of White middle-class and Black working-class and poor parents, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that teachers typically felt that they went to great lengths to welcome and encourage their involvement. The researchers discovered that in actuality, however, not only did teachers require parent behaviors to be positive and supportive of teachers but that parents also “trust their [teachers’] judgments and assessments” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 42). One teacher commented, “The parents that I enjoyed working with the most were the ones who would listen to how the child is and what they needed to work on and didn’t criticize [me]” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 43). Black working-class and poor parents were expected to accept teacher recommendations, coverage of curricular issues, and the general school culture without expressing negative or alternate opinions; but middle-class White parents were welcome to speak up and knew it. Gorman’s (1998) research on cultural capital included an example of a middle-class parent who advocated for her child. The parent said, “There are limited resources and the people who use the system work it to their advantage [and] leave the other kids in the dust. The case is that you get what you advocate” (as cited in
Gorman, 1998, p. 33). Researchers deliberating the behavior of parents at their children’s schools found an incongruence in the expectation that working-class parents acquiesce to the authority of the teacher and the acceptance of middle-class parents’ questioning such authority (Gorman, 1998; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Räty, 2003; Räty et al., 2004).

Specifically, Lareau and Weininger (2003) compared the experiences of a parent and student from a middle-class African American family with those of a working-class African American family, undertaking interventions with institutional authorities on behalf of their children. They found that the middle-class parent not only advocated for her daughter when dealing with her gymnastics coach, intervening when she felt that her daughter’s needs were not being addressed, but also taught her daughter how to respond to an adult in order to advocate for herself. By contrast, the researchers found that the working-class Black families were less assertive than the middle-class Black families.

The researchers (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) described an interaction between a working-class mother and a teacher at a conference. The teacher “used jargon such as ‘word attach skills’ and ‘written comprehension’” as she spoke to the mother regarding language difficulties her daughter was experiencing (pg. 596). In referencing the daughter, the teacher repeatedly mispronounced the daughter’s name. Visibly frustrated, the mother whispered the correct pronunciation of her daughter’s name but did not correct the teacher. Lareau and Weininger (2003) attributed the mother’s inaction to barriers caused by the used of educational jargon and a belief that “education was the
province of professional educators” (pg. 596). The implications of these findings are noteworthy, especially the extent to which such an account applied to the home–school partnership when dealing with parent–child negotiations about school attendance. The policy significance in understanding this relationship could be instrumental in improving home–school partnerships.

Lareau and Shumar (1996) suggested that the social class of a parent has some effect on how she or he negotiates the resources available in the school system. This has been a consistent message from Lareau (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In research on social class differences in family–school relationships, Lareau (1987) argued that “class-related cultural factors shape parents’ compliance with teachers’ requests for parental participation in schooling” (p. 74). In a qualitative study, Lareau (1987) posed two questions: “What do schools ask of parents in the educational experience of young children?” and “How do parents respond to schools’ requests?” (p. 74).

Lareau conducted participant observations of two first-grade classrooms and in-depth interviews of parents, teachers, and principals while students were in first and second grades. Her participants were White working-class and professional middle-class community members. She found that both working- and professional-class parents expressed the value that they saw in the educational process, wanted their children to perform well in school, and believed themselves to be supportive and helpful in their children’s school achievement. She also found that working-class parents were more
likely to turn over the responsibility of education to the teachers, whereas the professional-class parents saw themselves equal partners of teachers. Working-class parents believed that teachers were professionals whose job was to educate children; these parents often felt they did not possess the skills necessary to help their children and therefore left the job to the teachers. Professional-class parents, however, were more likely to scrutinize educational practices but believed that they were equally responsible in helping their children to grow academically (Lareau, 1987). Lareau (1987) concluded that “the level of parental involvement is linked to the class position of the parents and to the social and cultural resources that social class yields in American society” (p. 81).

Although Lareau (1987) implied that educators and policy makers should consider seeking ways to increase parent involvement and communication through policy, she later concluded that doing so is an unrealistic goal for educators. Lareau and Shumar (1996) stated, “We see educational policy as an unlikely agent for redistributing social resources to bring about greater equality . . . with other parents in the school community” (p. 33). They pointed out that parents come to the school with differing degrees of cultural and social capital and that educators are mistaken when they assume that some parents do not value education simply because they are not willing or able to fulfill the demands placed on them by the educational system (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Sennet & Cobb, 1972). Instead, recognizing that school personnel already had their hands full, Lareau and Shumar suggested that policy makers demonstrate the importance they placed
on parent involvement by providing funding for schools to hire educational consultants to act as liaisons between the school and family.

Räty (2003) investigated the role played by evaluations of vocational school-educated and university-educated parents of their own school experience in shaping their attitudes toward their children’s education. Gorman (1998, as cited in Räty, 2003) suggested that the probability of parents’ confirming or resisting additional educational opportunities for their children in order to assure occupational success depended on whether the parents had previously experienced the hidden injuries of class (cf. Sennet & Cobb, 1972).

**Hidden Injuries of Class**

In a large-scale survey, Gorman (1998) investigated the impact the social class of parents may have on their attitude toward their children’s education. Gorman stated the necessity of understanding the significance that resistance and conformity play in shaping the attitudes of parents toward their children’s education. “The probability that parents will conform to or resist the meritocratic ideology of acquiring a[n] . . . education . . . tends to depend on their social-class background and . . . ‘hidden injuries of class’” (Gorman, 1998, p. 11). Sennet and Cobb (1972), who introduced the concept of the hidden injuries of class, explained that the word *educated* as used by the working class participants they interviewed was code for a range of experiences and feelings that had little to do with a traditional view of education. Instead, it referred to the access to social mobility that the few holding diplomas enjoy. Sennet and Cobb’s (1972) participants
stated that diplomas are unequally distributed, and those in the middle class are afforded greater opportunities to gain access to better lives.

Although the term hidden injuries of class derived from the work of Sennett and Cobb in 1972, the impact of social class has been investigated by numerous sociologists, including Lynds, Duvall, Pearlin, Kohn, and others (as cited in Kohn, 1976). Bourdieu’s (1973) work in this area is the most extensive on the subject of the social class; however, Gorman’s work is of particular interest in terms of the relevance of the hidden injuries of class to this study.

When Gorman (1998) set out to determine “why . . . differences [exist] in attitudes toward education among social classes” (p. 11), many of his working-class subjects told him that the hidden injuries of class were work-related in nature; however, the feelings engendered by these injuries were then translated to impugn college-educated people as pretentious. One unemployed participant who had taken some college courses explained: “People who go to college . . . look down on people who don’t or haven’t attended college” (Gorman, 1998, p. 26). Participants described instances in which (a) bosses belittled workers’ lack of formal education, (b) coworkers whose job required shirts and ties made them feel inferior at work-sponsored Christmas parties, and (c) college-educated coworkers used vocabulary unfamiliar to them (Gorman, 1998). One working-class participant described injuries that took place while waiting in line at the bank, where businessmen in suits appeared to maintain an air of superiority in the presence of workers who stood in line, dirty and disheveled, waiting to cash their
paychecks. Gorman (1998) asked, “What is it about the business suit that irritates some members of the working class?” (p. 26) and answered his own question: “I would argue that it has less to do with the suit per se than with what the suit symbolizes” (Gorman, 1998, p. 26). Although understanding the general working-class view of these injuries may be valuable, applying this understanding to the experiences of working-class parents is more relevant to the current research.

Looking at the impact of hidden injuries on parents’ perspectives of their children’s education, Gorman (1998) reported that one half of his participants claimed that they did not feel a college degree was important to their children’s future success; the other half, whom he labeled conformists, found value in educational opportunities for their children. Sennet and Cobb (1972) reported a paradox: Although their participants routinely referred to the educated in respectful terms (i.e., Mrs., Mrs., Ms.) and expressed a sense that the educated held a higher status in society than they did, they also believed that their working-class skills provided greater intrinsic rewards and were more valuable to society. The participants often referred to the educated as “paper pushers” (Sennet & Cobb, 1972, pp. 21, 27). They wished better lives for their children and therefore espoused the value of a good education for them, but these working-class participants struggled with an ingrained belief that manual labor held greater tangible value. Even those who came from working-class backgrounds but gained entry into white-collar level positions often expressed a sense that they were imposters and spoke of themselves in defensive terms. Those unable to adjust to the white-collar environment and later lost
their new stations in life stated that “the tools of freedom [had] become a source of indignity” (Sennet & Cobb, 1972, p. 30). They voiced a concern that outsiders might blame laborers themselves for their economic failures (Sennet & Cobb, 1972).

With regard to the tools of freedom becoming a source of indignity, Sennet and Cobb (1972) relayed a story of boys attending a working-class school in Boston.

Teachers in this school took pride in their ability to establish their authority and keep order. “Teachers restrict[ed] the freedom of the children because these figures of authority [had] a peculiar fear of the children” (Sennet & Cobb, 1972, p. 80) from the working class. They described a scene in a classroom of Italian working-class children with dark complexions, whose teacher acknowledged that he had regrettably shown favoritism to Allen and Tony, two boys in class whose appearance was cleaner and lighter and who displayed “the right attitude” (p. 80). This teacher’s favoritism eventually caused other boys in the classroom, described as ordinary, to tease Allen and Tony. The two boys benefitted from the teacher’s positive attention, but their access to a better education caused them to suffer indignities from many of their classmates: Allen and Tony were labeled effeminate and called suck-ups by their peers. Sennet and Cobb described the experiences of the other boys in this school as “serving time” until they could escape the institution in order to grow as human beings, eventually finding jobs and earning money (1972, p. 82). Sennet and Cobb described the boys’ longing to escape as a type of solidarity in which they defied authority by breaking rules and cutting class; in essence, this behavior became a “badge of dignity” for these boys, whom Sennet and
Cobb labeled nonconformists (1972, p. 84). Thus, conforming to the rules of school became a source of shame and indignity they had to suffer if they were to eventually benefit from this tool of freedom and thus shuck the working-class caste into which they were born.

Sennet and Cobb (1972) described an atmosphere in which students felt that their teachers sat in silent judgment of them. Those who sat quietly, passively, were rewarded for their conforming behavior; and those who wished to demonstrate their understanding of the content but did not grasp it immediately were admonished for falling behind. Children who won the approval of the teacher were shunned by peers for conforming to the system and turning their backs on their compatriots. If children hungry for companionship and acceptance were friends of those who refused to conform (broke rules, skipped school), they were categorized with the rule breakers and treated with disregard by the teacher. Children were, therefore, unable to fit into the world that was offering the tools necessary for freedom—that of the educated—and unable to fit into the world of their peers, where they would be required to denounce the tools of freedom. Such children are alienated from both worlds, yet their parents continued to assert the value of the education to which they themselves had only limited access.

Sennet and Cobb (1972) explained that parents knew that “the teacher can open the gateway to opportunities the parents never had” (p. 88). Thus, children in this working-class school were trapped in what Sennet and Cobb called a double bind, that is, “a set of mutually contradictory commands which an individual tries to obey” (p. 208),
but obeying one command forces one to forgo another. The children who wished to benefit from the educational experience obeyed the teacher while at the same time refrained from behaviors that would alienate them from their peers. As these children grow into adulthood and begin families of their own, how do they internalize the dilemma of the double bind?

Examining the stories that Sennet and Cobb (1972) provided, one might say that the parents of the children interviewed in this inquiry expressed the value they placed on their children’s education; however, when these children grow into adults, do they hold this same value for their child’s education? What do they have to say about the process or procedures involved in educating their children, especially those dealing with student attendance?

**Parent–Child Negotiations**

Investigating the influence of the hidden injury of class can facilitate the way parents or students see themselves in society. With regard to the role that certain family dynamics play, parents often express frustration when trying to decide whether a child is truly ill or whether something else has caused the child’s reluctance to attend school. In my role as an assistant principal working with parents on parent-condoned chronic absenteeism, I frequently heard examples of their efforts to see that their children attended school. Parents’ statements about feeling worn down by negotiations when trying to talk a child into going to school led me to the goal of this research. The purpose of this study was to listen to the stories of parents whose children engaged in parent-
condoned chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of parents’
experience with the school environment regarding their child’s attendance.

The complicity of some parents in condoning their children’s absences takes
many forms. Reid (2006b) suggested that a parent’s attitude toward school was a
determining element in combating parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. He believed
that the failure of a small number of parents to be consistent in supporting the school’s
attendance policies with their children contributed to the parent–child negotiations that
later thwarted good school attendance. This assertion was supported by a body of work
by Reid in which he reported the results of truancy patrols conducted in April 2007 in
Swansea, England (2002). A patrol gathered 59 students who were absent from school
and roaming the nearby neighborhoods. Of those students who were returned to the
school that morning, over half of them were again picked up for truancy that afternoon.
Although just a few of the students originally picked up in the morning were actually
accompanied by their parents at the time they were detained, most of the parents
condoned the absences of their children during later follow-up visits from the law
enforcement officials.

Reid (1999) shed some light on the behavioral process that occurs in parent–child
negotiation over school attendance through a case study involving Maureen, a female
student who had missed 29 days of school at the time of the study. Maureen explained
that her parents did not want her to miss school, but she knew from experience that if she
continued to ask her parents to let her stay home, eventually they would relent. She
explained, “They keep saying you’ll have to go back—but I keep on and then they give in” (Reid, 1999, p. 35). Another parent in the study acknowledged that she suspected her daughter was not ill, but she was not sure and so often agreed to requests to stay home (Reid, 1999).

Sheppard (2005), who reported similar findings in her study, discovered that students reported that their parents’ reactions fell into one of four categories:

Inconsistent: The parents sometimes permit the child to stay home.

Gave up: After trying to persuade the child to go to school and following arguments, the parent gave up trying to enforce attendance.

Enforce school attendance: The parent successfully encouraged the child to attend school.

Problem solving: The parent tried to understand why the child did not wish to attend and attempted to sort the problem out, sometimes involving the school [authorities]. (Sheppard, 2005, p. 23)

Sheppard found that children of parents who had strong emotional reactions to their missing school were truant from school less often than children whose parents showed little or no response to absences.

In another case study conducted by Reid (2002), a mother explained that her daughter often stayed home because of back trouble but then added that while at home the daughter often performed household chores or went shopping. Another mother blamed the school for her daughter’s poor attendance because of suspensions imposed on
her daughter by the school; however, this mother also conceded that her daughter stayed home at times to help with house cleaning. The daughter stated that she stayed home when she was not ill; although her mother might yell at her for doing so, yelling was often the only consequence (Reid, 2002). When parents are ambivalent, they are more likely to relent in negotiations with their children about their school attendance (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Reid, 1999; Sheppard, 2005).

Sheppard (2006) reported that in order to understand the phenomenon of children’s chronic school absenteeism, one must look at it from the standpoint of child and early adolescent development. She stated, “All behavior is learned as a result of a complex interaction between the child . . . and the social environment around him [or] her, which encourages and discourages ways of behaving” (p. 21). Findings from Sheppard’s (2006) research, as well as this current study, support the contention that a parent’s response to a child’s request to be absent from school plays a significant role in whether a child attends school or stays home.

**Home–School Relationships**

In countries like Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States, movements have been organized to improve parent–school relationships. In the US, the No Child Left Behind law addressed improvement in these relationships, but this was not a new goal. “Every school will actively engage parents and families,” proclaimed the National Educational Goals Panel in 1994 (p. 12). Measures included welcoming parents into schools and classrooms. Administrators and teachers were not always willing to do so
(Auerbach, 2009), yet many believe that relationship building by school district personnel as well as making numerous efforts to keep parents informed can eliminate the effects of past negative experiences that parents may have had in the school setting (Bridgeland, Dililio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Graham-Clay, 2005). Some researchers (Lareau & Shumar, 1996), however, doubt that this is a realistic goal for every parent. The makers of school policies that deal with interactions with parents must take into account circumstances that influence how the latter experience the home–school relationship. Often parents see the home–school relationship from a perspective that corresponds to their occupational, income, and social structure background.

In their research on policies relating to families and schools, Lareau and Shumar (1996) found that the class status of parents involves factors that either helped or hindered their ability to interact with school personnel, including social networks, flexibility of work schedules or job sites, education level, and prior experiences with school personnel. This finding derived from an ethnographic study they conducted with families from middle, working, and lower classes. After conducting 72 classroom observations and intensive observations of 12 families through a series of interactions with adults who played a key role in the lives of these families, Lareau and Shumar offered empirical examples that challenged current thinking regarding policies involving family–school relationships. Parents’ ability to benefit from the presence or lack of any of the attributes noted here can influence how they negotiate the parent–school relationship. Lareau and Shumar asserted, “Policymakers need to take group differences
in the connections among parents, as well as those between parents and educators, more seriously” (1996, p. 29). Encouraging family–school interactions is insufficient to satisfy the need for such interactions. Assuming a lack of involvement is indicative of the value parents place on their children’s education is an error of faulty logic.

Much of the current research on family–school relationships has dealt with the perceived benefits of active family involvement with schools, but little research has been conducted on the negative effects of these relationships (Lareau & Shumar, 1996), which often became adversarial, with school personnel citing laws and penalties when students and parents failed to conform (Reid, 1999, 2002). Lareau and Shumar (1996) emphasized that “educators need to acknowledge this unequal power relationship in family–school encounters” (p. 31). According to Lareau and Shumar researchers have generally neglected

The negative consequences of active family involvement in schooling.

The policies often ignore the overall impact of social class on [parent] participation. . . . Powerful group differences in family–school relationships . . . . shape parents’ ability to comply. (pp. 31–33)

According to Lareau and Shumar school district policymakers and federal lawmakers have failed to consider family–school relationships.

A growing number of researchers have stated that family dynamics is the key influence in most cases (Scott-Jones, 1995). Scott-Jones (1995) argued that the child develops a sense of the value of education early in life. When a family places value on
education, the child will usually develop a sense of value as well; however, not only what a parent says informs a child’s understanding of the value of education but also what they do or fail to do (Scott-Jones, 1995, p. 75).

Through a parent’s behavior toward school, argued Scott-Jones (1995), children develop a sense of the value of education. Parents, who monitor their children’s progress, interact with school, and work to enforce academic and behavioral goals consistent with their local school convey a positive attitude to their children regarding the importance they place on education (Scott-Jones, 1995). Although one may fairly say that each child is unique in the way she or he processes this type of information, those students exposed to the value of education are more likely to value school than those without such positive exposure (Scott-Jones, 1995).

Home–school communication plays an important role in nurturing home–school relationships. Graham-Clay (2005) shared the various “avenues of communication” (p. 118) school use to communicate with parents, students, and the community. Forms of one-way communication include letters, newsletters, school–home notebooks, report cards, progress reports, and notices. The types of two-way communication used by schools often consist of phone calls home, parent–teacher conferences, and the occasional home visit (Auerbach, 2009).

As educators become increasingly tech savvy, schools have implemented various ways to communicate with parents, students, and the community via email, websites, electronic gradebooks and newsletters, digital portfolios, Twitter, and Skype. Such
media offer convenient ways to reach out to parents and communities to share information, and achievement as well as celebrate students and school efforts (Ramirez, 2001); however, these types of communication can be also be problematic. Interpreting the tone of an email can be difficult. Bryon (2008) found that the characteristics of email communication can cause the intended message to be misinterpreted “as more emotionally negative or neutral than intended,” leading to miscommunication (p. 309).

Of equal concern is the assumption that families have access to electronic devices (Ramirez, 2001); a “lack of technology also limits communication opportunities for many families” (Graham-Clay, 2005, p.125).

**Relationships: Students’ Perspectives on Engagement**

Parent involvement and engagement in the school environment is one step in developing a sense of the value of educational; however, finding ways to make schools relevant to students is of greater importance. Students who are able to find value in the educational process are more likely to attend school regularly (Scott-Jones, 1995). Taylor and Parson’s (2011) review of the literature showed several types of student engagement: academic, cognitive, intellectual, institutional, emotional, behavioral, social and psychological. Thus far, I have focused on the perceptions of parents, but students’ perceptions are also important.

Cothran and Ennis (2000) defined *engagement* as “the willingness of students to make the ‘psychological investment required to comprehend and master knowledge and skills’” (as cited in Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989, p. 177). In their
investigation of teachers’ and students’ perspective on engagement, Cothran and Ennis (2000) found several impediments to student engagement. Teachers in their study reported that student attitudes contributed to a lack of engagement in the classroom and that they struggled to find ways to develop instructional strategies to increase it. The researchers found disagreement between teachers and students in identifying who was responsible for student engagement. A teacher complained, “Teachers have to be entertainers now to get the kids to pay attention” (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 110). Students expressed difficulty in finding relevance in the content. One said, “I just don’t see how this stuff is going to help me from here” (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 110). Both teachers and students agreed that student engagement is important to increasing students’ willingness to learn.

Cothran and Ennis (2000) found three important ways for teachers to remove or reduce impediments to student engagement. “A key factor in students’ willingness to engage in class was their perception of the teacher’s willingness to communicate with them” (Cothran & Ennis, 2002, p. 111). Effective communication was dependent upon students’ perception of the level of care and respect demonstrated by teachers and the degree to which they valued students. For example, students expressed concerns that teachers failed to make connections with them because they made no effort to get to know them. Connections were powerful motivators for students. One student said, “You gotta get to know your kids. Conversate [sic] with them. Bond with them. Talk with them before class” (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 111). Second, students acknowledged the
importance of respect; for these students, respect was not bestowed upon teachers but was instead earned when they demonstrated respect for their students. Finally, students wanted more input in the class decision-making process in order to increase their involvement (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). These beliefs are important keys to improving student engagement.

Caring was another important aspect to reducing impediments to student engagement. Cothran and Ennis (2000) found an incongruence between what teachers thought students’ valued and what students actually valued.

Educators often assumed that students cared about the subject matter or at least about their grades. . . . [Students, however, experienced difficulty making connections between the content and] their world outside of school . . . When students perceived . . . that the teacher cared if they learned, they were much more willing to engage despite the incongruence. (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 112) Although finding ways to make content relevant to students is important to their learning, showing them that they are cared for and valued is important in preparing them to learn.

Sometimes students need more care and encouragement than they are able to find at home or in their classrooms. Bridgeland et al. (2006) stated that school personnel need to provide a range of strategies for at-risk students, including attendance monitoring, academic tutors and mentors, caring adults who are “strong advocates [capable of making] a difference in the lives of students who are at risk of dropping out” (p. 15). The Commission for Youth at Risk (American Bar Association, 2012) echoed this sentiment
by encouraging schools to provide mentors and advocates for students, using a case management approach to help monitor student progress and provide encouragement as well as truancy intervention, a recommendation supported by the National Association for Secondary School Principals (“Alliance for Excellent Education,” 2004).

**Socially Toxic Environments and Youth**

Although educators have suspected that certain home–life conditions negatively influence the ability of some young people to engage productively in learning at school, most of the evidence is anecdotal. Garbarino (1997) confirmed that hours of unstructured time largely unsupervised by adults and exposure to chronic negative social influences as well as a lack of protective resources stunts the healthy development of American youth. Garbarino referred to the socially detrimental environments that result when the social world of children, the social context in which they grow up, has become poisonous to their development—just as harmful substances in the environment threaten human well-being and survival (1997, p. 12). Such environments can become so harmful that they interfere with the social, emotional, and psychological development of the child (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Harm may result from family disruption, depression, violence, poverty, economic pressures, racism, and alienation (Garbarino, 1997). “Youth today must contend with a constant stream of messages that undermine their sense of security” (Garbarino, 1998a, p. 54). As with environmental toxins, the effects of a socially detrimental environment can be lasting and debilitating both for young people and for positive school experiences.
Youth most vulnerable to the effects of a socially detrimental environment are those who have accumulated the most developmental risk factors, including disruption of family relationships, despair, depression, alienation, exaggerated forms of discipline, lack of appropriate adult supervision, sexual abuse, and other negative influences (Garbarino, 1998a). Children who are raised in socially detrimental environments are likely to grow up to be parents who lack a background in affective parenting skills, and thus the cycle may be perpetuated.

**The Role of Leadership in Improving Home–School Relationships**

The validity of Lareau and Shumar’s (1996) claim that the encounters between school personnel and parents can result in an adversarial relationship requires consideration, especially possible causes of this perception. In their critique of recent research on family and school policies, Lareau and Shumar discussed the varying abilities of families to negotiate their role in their children’s educational experiences because of the differing educational skills, economic resources, social networks, and the unequal positions of power that they bring to the home–school relationship. For the purposes of the current research, examining the impact that leadership can have in leveling the playing field is important when it comes to issues of power in the home–school rapport.

Administrators are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that schools are making strides in improving opportunities for students; however, at times achieving this goal creates a conflict. Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) described a
phenomenon known as push out, in which students at risk of failing high-stakes achievement tests are encouraged or forced by administrators to drop out or withdraw from school. Although some students who are pushed out are encouraged to enroll in another school district or educational option, some are simply told that they are permanently expelled. In a technical report, Orfield et al. showed that schools (in as many as 12 states) misrepresent graduation rates by labeling some students as “transferred to another district” in an effort to mask the push-out of these students as a result of their poor attendance or poor academic performance. The authors described a practice in Alabama, in which board representatives . . . admitted that 522 students were administratively withdrawn (i.e., involuntarily) in the spring of 2000. . . . To this day, students continue to be “withdrawn” from school for lack of interest, academic failure, and poor attendance; and the Birmingham schools continue to be under enormous pressure to raise standardized test scores. (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004 p. 26)

Removing poor-performing students and students who do not regularly attend school is an action of last resort for administrators ill-equipped or ill-trained to meet the needs of at-risk students.

Orfield et al. (2004) described the failure of school administrators to include parents in the decision-making process of their children’s educational future:
Of all of the pushed out students with whom Mr. Orel [the administrator] came in contact, none had voluntarily withdrawn. In fact, some had actually returned to the school with their parents or guardians and asked to be readmitted, but their requests were denied. Parents had not been included in the withdrawal meetings, and some parents did not even know their children had been withdrawn. (p. 29)

Parents had little to no power, authority, or control over the withdrawing of their children from school. Decisions were made unilaterally by school personnel without the input or knowledge of these parents. Such practices are the result of a failure of district personnel and administrators to engage families and community resources in addressing the cause of academic failure and poor student attendance.

In the 2009–2010 Family Guide to the Birmingham Public Schools, the members of the board of education expressed their desire to “listen to concerns of parents, students, staff and other community members” (Birmingham Public Schools, 2009, p. 8). Clearly, someone has failed to communicate concerns to the families of these pushed out students. Their situation is an example of the adversarial type of relationship to which Lareau and Shumar (1996) referred. Equity in the home–school relationship will always be difficult to achieve. Lareau and Shumar (1996) viewed “educational policy as an unlikely agent for redistributing social resources to bring about greater equality” (p. 33); however, I believe that equality must be addressed through educational policy, and doing so is the moral responsibility of educators.
I argue that not only is redistributing social resources a responsibility of the modern school leader but that it is also a practice that must be articulated by educational policy and practiced by school leaders; in effect, it is the moral purpose of the school leader. Fullan (2001) defined moral purpose as “acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (p. 3). He wrote, “All leadership, if it is effective, must have a strong component of sharedness” (p. xx). By acting with a moral purpose, school leaders can bring about social justice in their schools.

School personnel often use the term leadership but operate under the definition of administrator. Lipham, who is considered a major contributor to the definition of leadership in the school setting, explained the difference in the meaning of the two terms: The term administrator is “concerned primarily with maintaining, rather than changing established structures, procedures, or goals; [whereas the term leader] is concerned with initiating changes in established structure, procedures, or goals” (Lipham, as cited in Snowden & Gorton, 1998, p. 65). At one time, leadership was defined in terms of heroic traits; however, that definition was later broadened to include the importance of the situation (Kayrooz & Fleming, 2008). In the contemporary education landscape four types of leadership styles have emerged.

The four leadership styles most commonly associated with education leadership and organizational learning are laissez-faire, transactional, transformational, and situational. Laissez-faire leadership is a passive style of leadership that negatively
correlates with school organizational learning (Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010). The transactional leadership style is characterized by the leader’s use of contingent rewards to reinforce desired behaviors by followers who apply “active vigilance” (Kurland et al., 2010, p. 11). The transactional leader aims to ensure that certain standards or goals are met; this type of leader intervenes only after followers have failed to comply or have made mistakes (Kurland et al., 2010). The transformational leader challenges followers to be creative problem solvers, is nurturing and attentive to individual needs, is inspirational, and uses influence to focus followers on the beliefs and mission of the organization (Kurland et al., 2010). Finally, the situational leader is adaptable and flexible and is often situational in nature (Snowden & Gorton, 1998). In the 1970s theorists studied leadership from a perspective of both the person and the situation (Vroom & Yetton, 1973); thus, the model of the distributed leadership style emerged (Kayrooz & Fleming, 2008).

Distributed leadership evolved from the theory of situational leadership. Vroom and Yetton initially described this style of leadership in 1973. In their model, leadership was not only situational, but some leaders engaged others in the decision-making process (Kayrooz & Fleming, 2008). The framework of distributed leadership includes two distinct forms that Gronn (2003) labeled the additive and the holistic. The additive form is described as unorganized, without specific roles, and somewhat uncoordinated with other leadership efforts in the organization (Leithwood et al., 2007). A leader in the additive form of distributed leadership can be anyone or any number of people associated
with the organization. The holistic form of distributed leadership is a more organized social process of distributing leadership in an organization (Leithwood et al., 2007). Waterhouse (2007) argued, “The degree of distributed leadership that exists within a school is a measure of the trust and respect between individuals” (p. 271). In this investigation, however, I looked at ways in which distributed leadership provides opportunities to create partnerships with parents in an effort to improve home–school relationships.

Distributed leadership involves two distinct aspects: the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. In the leader-plus aspect school leadership is acknowledged as shared with various individuals, including assistant principals, teacher–leaders, and school specialists in addition to the building principal; however, in this study I focused on the practice aspect. Spillane and Camburn (2006) explained that “leadership practice [is] a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situations. Practice takes shape at the intersection of these three elements” (p. 9). If the distributed leadership framework is an avenue that encourages and facilitates a shared community undertaking in which parents actively engage in dialogue, it has the potential to create an atmosphere in which the school administration and parents work together. These efforts have the potential to build collaborations in which both share the responsibility for finding solutions that improve or facilitate communication regarding home–school relationships, including communication about student attendance. Distributed leadership is not a top-down type of leadership, nor is it seen as an effort to negate the role of the
building principal. According to Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2007) “mobilizing and generating resources to strengthen initiatives that contribute to achieving social justice is an essential part of effective leadership” (p. 383). The potential for this type of leadership to bridge home–school relationships seems promising. In fact, Leithwood et al. (2007) found evidence that distributed leadership increases teacher leadership but failed to find evidence that would support the idea that distributed leadership fosters the same leadership practices in other parts of the school community.

If distributed leadership encourages the efforts of multiple stakeholders to participate in the process, school district leaders should prepare all school personnel to share in the process. An overwhelming amount of research supports the positive influence that effective home–school relationships have on increasing student achievement and reducing student absences (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Ho, 2002; Reid, 2002; Sheppard, 2005; Sheverbush & Smith, 2000). School leaders have traditionally failed to provide adequate professional development in promoting these positive relationships and capacity building at all levels of the school organization. McAfee (1987) found that a mere 37% of certified staff members he surveyed received professional development in the area of home–school relationships, and 35% of service and support staff surveyed expressed a desire to receive such training. “Administrators must provide the leadership that makes clear to everyone that only the home and school working together can create ‘effective schools’” (McAfee, 1987, p. 187). More work needs to be done.
Summary

At-risk youth are defined by the way in which their life circumstances align them with future negative outcomes. Using stereotypes that focus on economic background, race, or community to define at-risk youth can result in failing to support those who are the most in need of assistance. School personnel can use many factors to identify students who are most at risk (Smith, 2006); however, they should focus on those factors specific to their student population.

Parents play an important role in home–school relationships, and their participation may depend on how they are received by the school community. Providing opportunities that encourage parent participation is just one part of a comprehensive framework to provide all stakeholders an opportunity to be a part of the process. Educators must understand the how parents’ prior experiences in an educational setting influence their decision-making process regarding their child’s educational experiences.

Researchers (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Reid, 1999; Ryan & Adams, 1995; Sheppard, 2005) have demonstrated that parent–child negotiations play a key part in the family–school relationships of some families. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) and Sheppard (2005) provided some insight on how students negotiate school absences with their parents or guardians in an effort to avoid attending school. Equally important to this discussion is an understanding of the way these negotiations may be linked to parents’ past experience with the school, relationships with school personnel, or a family’s socioeconomic background.
An examination of research on cultural capital and hidden injuries of class provided a backdrop on how families negotiate access to societal resources. Clear evidence has suggested that some parents have the social capital necessary to negotiate their child’s access to a quality education, but a lack of such resources appears to negatively impact one’s ability to benefit from such an education. Children’s exposure to a positive sense of educational values can positively influence their outlook on their educational experience.

Youth engagement centers on students’ perception that their teachers respect them and that adults care about them. One way that adults can demonstrate respect and caring with their students is to communicate with them, both to express an interest in them and to show they acknowledge that students are human beings. This sense of caring is even more important for students who come from environments that are socially toxic because the lack of protective resources has a negative effect on the healthy development of young people.

Finally, a review of leadership styles was presented. The notion of distributed leadership appears to have the greatest potential for creating true collaborative working relationships between school personnel and families. The potential for this type of leadership to strengthen home–school relationships seems most promising in breaking down barriers that have negatively impacted progress in the past.
CHAPTER III
METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

A review of current literature on parent-condoned absences indicated a need for additional research (Brown, 1987; Reid, 2006a), especially on the lack of successful efforts to foster effective family–school communication (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Researchers who praised the positive effects of home–school partnerships that account for student success have failed to consider the social consequences such practices may have in “shap[ing] parents’ ability to comply” (Lareau & Shumar, 1996, p. 33). Specifically, middle-class parents, working-class parents, and teachers define communication differently. Working-class parents and lower-class feared communication with school officials because of the potential for an abuse of power. “Parents repeatedly expressed fear that the school would turn them in to welfare agencies and ‘take their kids away’” (pg. 30). Although a plethora of researchers have documented the effects of chronic absenteeism and truancy on student learning or educational outcomes (Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004; Nichols, 2003; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004; Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005), none have explored how parents experience the school environment when dealing with parent-condoned chronic absenteeism.

Constructivist grounded theory, the qualitative approach selected for this study, allows researchers to “learn how . . . research participants make sense of their
experiences [so that researchers can make] analytic sense of their meanings and actions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11). The value of using a qualitative research method in uncovering how parents experience the school environment when dealing with their children’s chronic absenteeism cannot be overstated. Reid used qualitative methods in his entire body of work (1985, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2006a, 2006b) in an effort to understand how parents experience parent–child negotiations when dealing with parent-condoned truancy. Ovink (2011) used qualitative methods in her ethnographic study to “examine and critique institutional responses to school truancy” (p. 80). The qualitative studies of Lareau and Shumar (1996), which motivated my search to understand chronic school absences, as well as the work of Lareau (1987), Lareau and Horvat (1999), and Lareau and Weininger (2003) have all provided valuable insights to researchers, policymakers, and school personnel in order to understand parents’ experiences in the school environment.

The data for this research study consisted of the “lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11) of parents dealing with chronic absenteeism that they condoned; however, the study was constructed in such a way that the “researcher and subjects [framed their] interaction and [conferred] meaning upon it” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). My investigation moved beyond description of the experiences to substantive theory development (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I have explored and analyzed the data derived from interviews with participants who experienced parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and have built theory based on an
interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of this study was to listen to the stories of parents whose children engaged in chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of how they experienced the school environment when dealing with their children’s attendance. My research question was as follows: How do parents experience the school environment when dealing with their children’s chronic absenteeism?

**Method**

In this study I used the constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2006) to investigate barriers to family–school relationships that contribute to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. Some educators who have struggled with parent-condoned chronic absenteeism have claimed that parents who permit their children to miss school when they are not ill are at fault (Reid, 2006a). In his research, Reid (1999, 2002, 2006a, 2006b) investigated the negotiations that take place between a child and parent when the latter tries to enforce school attendance policy. Using similar terms, Sheppard’s (2005) study “aimed to question children on the parent–child interaction that takes place before departure for school and its role in determining whether or not the child leaves the house to go to school” (p. 21). I interviewed parents of students identified with a pattern of chronic absenteeism during their high school years in an effort to explore in depth what they experienced when their child negotiated with them in an effort to stay home from school. For the purpose of this study, I defined the term *chronic absenteeism* as 10 days or more of excused and unexcused absences from any one school year as identified by
data from school district’s Education Management Information System (EMIS). A better understanding of the process of negotiation has the potential to give school administrators some insight into what parents experience with their children regarding school attendance, and thus school administrators can use this information to improve the support they provide to parents in their efforts to see that their children attend school.

**Rationale for Choosing Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was the best choice for my research methodology because it involves the “study of experience from the standpoint of those who live it” (Merriam, 2002, p. 143). In grounded theory methodology a relationship between the researcher and participants is encouraged in an effort to help the latter speak freely and tell their stories; furthermore, the effect this relationship may have on the researcher’s interpretation is acknowledged (Charmaz, 2000, Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The methodology allowed me to move beyond meaning-making in order to generate a theory of the process (Creswell, 2007) that takes place when parents decide to permit their children to miss school.

I selected the constructivist approach to grounded theory because it is an approach in which priority is placed on the phenomena under consideration and in which data and analysis derive from “shared experience and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130), including the researcher. As opposed to other research methods, constructivist methods involve a certain reciprocal relationship between the participant and the researcher (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). This
relationship is essential to the coconstruction of meaning by researcher and participant (Mill et al., 2006) and to the constructivist grounded theory approach itself. I did not, however, approach this study with a blank slate. I have experienced parent-condoned chronic absenteeism from personal, professional, and theoretical standpoints. I have provided this information in an effort to make a full disclosure and reveal my theoretical sensitivity.

**Theoretical Sensitivity**

Holton (2007) stated that the “ability to conceptualize rests with the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity” (p. 274), that is, “the ability to see with analytic depth what is there” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 76). Researchers obtain their theoretical sensitivity from life experiences, from their professional interactions, and from the literature they have read. Theoretical sensitivity has the potential to tint the lens through which they view the world around them. It “is a multidimensional concept that includes the researchers’ level of insight into the research area, how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant’s words” (Mills et al., 2006, p. 4). When choosing a research design, Mills et al. (2006) suggested that researchers “must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their belief[s] about the nature of reality” (p. 2). Constructivist grounded theorists work from an epistemological framework in which the researcher and participant coconstruct a theory grounded in the experiences of both the participant and the researcher (Mills et al., 2006).
As a school administrator, I have struggled with the issue of improving student attendance. I often called parents to inquire about their children’s attendance, only to be berated by the parent, who told me to mind my own business and to leave them to raise their children as they saw fit. I did not understand why they directed their hostility at me; I was merely doing my job. One day I came across an article titled, “The Problem of Individualism in Family–School Policies” by Lareau and Shumar (1996). This research article changed the paradigm I used to understand the family–school relationship. In this article the authors discussed their concerns with school personnel who failed “to grapple with observable differences in parents’ and guardians’ compliance with educational policies” (Lareau & Shumar, 1996, p. 24). It caused me to wonder why such strained relationships existed between parents and administrators when dealing with issues of chronically absent students. Thus began my effort to theorize the interactions that took place as I worked to improve student attendance. Charmaz (2006) explained that theorizing “means stopping, pondering, and rethinking anew” (p. 135). As researchers experience situations, they examine them from various perspectives or vantage points to improve their understanding of what has occurred. They make comparisons and follow leads in order to gain theoretical sensitivity. Charmaz (2006) held that when researchers theorize, they “reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience. The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it” (p. 135). It encourages and allows the researcher to study a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who experience it (Charmaz, 2000, 2006).
Schram (2006) wrote, “The frame of reference from which [researchers] view [their] inquiry represents a conscious choice that informs and extends [their] research aims” (p. 51). Constructivists like Charmaz (2006) approached a grounded theory study with the understanding that grounded theories are constructed from the researcher’s interpretations of how participants view the phenomenon. According to Charmaz (2006), “The theory depends on the researcher’s view” (p. 130); she explained, “What observers see and hear depends upon their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context” (p. 206). Therefore, I would be remiss to omit my personal association with this topic.

My motivation to pursue this research topic derives from both my personal and professional experiences. The tendency in research endeavors has been to remove the researcher from the research because of concerns of potential contamination (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000); however, grounded theory researchers (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) believed that having experience with a topic enhances the sensitivity of the researcher. Acknowledging my voice represents my effort to be both open to my readers and socially responsible to my participants (Fine et al., 2000).

Growing up, I was the youngest of five children raised by an uneducated, divorced mother, who struggled with unemployment and alcoholism; she was unable to provide a stable home life for her children. Although I enjoyed school for the most part as a small child, by the age of seven I engaged in antisocial behaviors (fighting, disruptions, and outbursts) at school. By the time my parents divorced, I had attended my
sixth school in eight years. At this point I entered into the negotiation process to secure my mother’s permission to miss school. Daily I told her that I was ill or that I was bullied at school; sometimes I fabricated a story believable enough to allow me to stay home. Although I was capable of simply skipping school, talking her into condoning my absences was easy, and thus I avoided discipline at home and school.

By ninth grade (and my tenth school), I attended school in the morning and then left campus in the afternoon. No one ever asked me where I was. If someone had, he or she would have discovered that I was working in the afternoon as a housekeeper to help my mother pay the rent and buy food; however, no one ever asked. By October of my ninth grade year, I quit school altogether. This was unofficial, of course; I simply stopped attending school. We moved five or six times that year. How could school officials keep track of me? Although I eventually returned to school, my education was so fragmented that I was unable to read or do more than simple math. After my high school graduation, I enrolled in a local public university but was expelled with a 1.75 GPA. By this time, I was a young mother with a bleak future, and I had resigned myself to working as a waitress and selling my blood plasma in order to earn a living.

Through early childhood intervention, a doctor diagnosed my son with a learning disability at the age of three. He received instructional support through the preschool services available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Twice a week I took him to a hearing and speech therapist for assistance. Part of his therapy required that I read to him at home; however, I was unable to read. Each time I
took my son in for his language therapy, the therapist shared hints and suggestions on how to improve my reading skills while at the same time helping my son. Eventually, I gained enough confidence and skill that I reenrolled at the university from which I had been expelled, raised my grade point average, and graduated with a degree in education.

I am now a high school principal and have conducted numerous presentations on chronic absenteeism. I have both witnessed first-hand and heard many stories about the effects of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism in so many lives. As a principal, I witnessed situations where students wrestled with the effects of their chronic absenteeism. I have engaged in struggles with parents who have condoned their child’s truant behavior. My experience as a child whose parent condoned my frequent absences, as a principal who dealt with attendance issues, and as a presenter on parent-condoned chronic absenteeism have formed the lens through which I view student attendance. I have often confronted attendance situations that remind me of myself as a youth. In trying to help families break the cycle of chronic absenteeism, I draw upon my experience as a youth to help parents identify pitfalls that contribute to their children’s chronic absences.

These experiences have provided me with a broad view of the subject of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and deeper insight. My position at the center of the spectrum of views gives me the ability as a researcher to understand and interpret participants’ points of view. In addition, it also gives me background knowledge that few researchers have. I have experienced parent-condoned chronic absenteeism from the
point of view of the family and the administrator. This has enabled me to hear the nuances of participants’ stories and experiences, which helped me describe the process. My social constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2007) qualifies me to interpret and communicate participants’ experiences and construct a theory that can help administrators develop policy that will enable them to collaborate with families. Cooper and Christie (2005) discussed the potential impact that the “motivation, biases, values, attitudes and political pressures” of researchers can have on their subjectivity (p. 2253). The purpose of including this personal narrative was to provide transparency regarding issues of possible bias and to ensure the rigorous nature of this research. Failure to identify the position from which this constructivist researcher has interacted in previous family–school partnerships has the potential to call into question the objectivity of the research findings (Cooper & Christie, 2005).

**Participants**

**Sampling Selection**

For this study I identified parents who had direct experience with parent-condoned chronic absenteeism and interacted in the school environment regarding their children’s chronic absenteeism. Students’ attendance records were used to help ensure that participants met the attendance criteria. Participants were expressly asked whether they had interactions with personnel at their children’s school regarding incidents of chronic absenteeism in order to determine that participants met the criterion of interaction in the school environment.
Corbin and Strauss (1990) stated that the researcher must look for samples where they exist; in the current study, the sample consisted of parents or guardians who had experience with the phenomenon under consideration (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), however, this is only the first layer in identifying research samples: “When a project begins, the researcher brings to it some idea of the phenomenon he or she wants to study” (p. 8) and then samples incidents and events related to the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Participants were, therefore, parents or guardians, whose children were identified by patterns of chronic absenteeism that included both excused and unexcused absences.

Morse (2007) discussed the importance of finding the right participants when using grounded theory. She explained that the process used to identify participants for a grounded theory research project resembled those procedures used to identify participants for an ethnographic research project (2007). “An excellent participant for grounded theory is one who has been through, or observed, the experience under investigation (Morse, 2007, p. 231). Morse (2007) emphasized that “the qualitative researcher must select participants to observe or interview who know the information (or have had or are having the experience)” (p. 232) with the phenomenon under consideration. This required the use of purposeful sampling in which the researchers “choose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 65), thus ensuring that the participants have experienced the phenomenon under study and that their experiences can shed light on it.
A method for identifying participants who had experienced parent-condoned chronic absenteeism existed at the school that served as the setting for this investigation. Prior to the 2009–2010 school year, no system was in place specifically to identify the reason that a student was absent from school, but beginning with the 2009–2010 school year, the method of tracking student absences changed at this school. All high school attendance aides were required to learn a coding system that accurately identified the reason for a student’s absence: for example, medical, dental, funeral, court, college visits. With the new absence coding system, school personnel effectively pinpointed specific absence identifiers, which facilitated efforts at the school to target interventions to improve student attendance. This coding system was a valuable resource for me in identifying participants for this study. I needed participants from a pool of students who attended this school during the time period after the coding system was implemented and, therefore, excluded students who graduated, dropped out, or left the district prior to the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year.

This coding system was vital and necessary to this research study because it allowed for the accurate identification of families who experienced the phenomenon under consideration. Although the school district administrators planned to implement this coding system district-wide beginning in the 2011–2012 school year, such attendance data was not available until June 2012. That research participants come from the high school was essential because this coding system had been in place there since the 2009–2010 school year.
In addition to changing the coding system used for tracking student absences, an attendance intervention program called Attendance Watch was adopted at the high school (Swartz, 2006). The Attendance Watch program (see Appendix A) was designed to (a) monitor student attendance closely, (b) foster the early identification of students at risk for chronic absenteeism, (c) improve communication with students and families on attendance issues, (d) encourage school personnel to establish relationships with families, and (e) provide resources and strategies to help students and families improve student attendance. Students who accumulated 10 total days of absences in a school year not excused with a note by a doctor, counselor, court official, or other official documentation were placed on Attendance Watch. As a part of the process, the school administrator who created an intervention plan with input from the student closely monitored his or her attendance in an effort to minimize future absences and provide assistance to address the reason for the chronic absenteeism.

For the purpose of this study, potential participants were parents of students identified with a pattern of chronic absenteeism, that is, 10 or more cumulative absences from the previous school year as identified by school district EMIS data. All of the participants’ children were students who graduated, dropped out, or were no longer attending school in the district used for this study as required by the Kent State Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the study was approved by the Kent State IRB, I identified the pool of potential participants using a Data Analysis for Student Learning (DASL) Student Absence Search Detail (R309A) report for the 2010–2011 and
2011–2012 school years. Using the EMIS family report, I eliminated qualifying participants who still had children attending school in the district from the potential pool participants per the requirement imposed by the Kent State IRB (#11-461). The first participant pool contained 57 students in the 2009–2010 graduating cohort and 68 students in the 2010–2011 graduating cohort. With the consent of the Kent State IRB, the researcher increased the participant pool to include 51 students in the 2011–2012 graduating cohort, all of whom met the identification criteria for participation in this study.

During the 2009–2010 school year, the high school that served as the setting for this study had a student population of approximately 1,680 students. Of those students, 49 freshmen, 49 sophomores, 54 juniors, and 92 seniors met the criteria for the Attendance Watch program. The use of purposeful sampling based on a specific criterion (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Morse, 2007) was important to ensure that selected participants had experienced the phenomenon and that the perspective was that of the parent. Creswell (2007) stated that decisions about sampling must be made consistent with the type of inquiry used by the researcher. Criterion-specific purposeful sampling helped to ensure that participants had experienced the phenomenon under study.

An initial invitation (see Appendix B) to participate was mailed to 125 potential participants in February 2012. The post office returned 19 invitations as undeliverable. Four potential subjects of the 106 responded to the invitation, one who requested that the researcher no longer contact him and three others who expressed interest in the research
study. Of these potential participants, one later declined, and two chose to participate. Each participant was notified prior to their interview that they would last no longer than 90 minutes and informed that at least one follow-up interview might be scheduled, if necessary. Participants were also notified that they could withdraw from the research study at any time. Initially, I offered participants a $15 gift card as a way to increase their willingness to participate in this study and as a token of appreciation for the time needed to conduct this interview; however, the initial pool only yielded two actual participants.

In November 2012, I resubmitted an application for research approval and requested to increase the participation incentive to $50. After receiving approval in November 2012, I sent another 56 invitations. Of those invitations, the post office returned 29 invitations as undeliverable. Seven potential subjects from this mailing responded to the invitation. One participant requested not to be contacted again. One potential participant at first agreed to be a part of the study but then later declined. Five participants from this round of invitations initially volunteered to participate. Of the five volunteers, four participated. One subject initially agreed to participate on two occasions but each time failed to respond to emails or phone requests to determine a time and location for an interview. Ultimately, I interviewed six participants for this study.

**Description of Participants**

All of the descriptive information provided below, with the exception of attendance data, was extracted from each participant’s interview transcript. As a condition for IRB permission to conduct this study, at no time was parent, student, or
family information, other than attendance data, obtained from school records. I refer to all parent participants in this inquiry with pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

Lynn was a divorced, single mother of three children: two boys and one girl. She was identified as a participant for this study based on the attendance record of her son, who struggled academically in school and accumulated 33 absences during his junior year in high school. Lynn shared her own academic struggles as a child in school. She remembered with fondness participating in special education classes during second and third grades. Her experiences in elementary school were positive; however, her experiences in high school were negative. She had difficulty reading; she struggled in her classes and often asked other students to help her with her assignments. Lynn completed 11 years of schooling and continued to struggle with spelling.

Lynn and her children moved to northwest Ohio when her son was in seventh grade. He had experienced academic difficulties in school and was retained in first grade. All of her children attended a private school prior to the move. Lynn enrolled her children in a private school once they settled in their new community as well; however, Lynn’s son, who had emotional trouble after the incarceration of his father, was expelled from the private school and for the first time enrolled in a public school. At some point he was diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) but refused to take the medication. He continued to struggle in school, earning few credits. He turned 18 years old during his junior year and withdrew from school. This decision later
resulted in conflict between mother and son, eventually leading to Lynn to expel him from her home.

Chris was a working mother with one daughter and one son, but her husband was not the biological father of her children. She described her economic status as middle-class. Her son accumulated 54 absences during his sophomore year and 37 absences during his junior year in high school. Chris and her family moved to Ohio from the west coast in 2006. Her son enjoyed participating in athletic activities prior to moving to Ohio. During his first year at his new school, he was in the eighth grade and joined the wrestling team. In ninth grade he tried out for football but was unable to make the team; consequently, he soon lost interest in school. Chris said that her son was bored in school and had a tendency to fidget. She suspected that he might have ADHD; however, he was never formally diagnosed with the disorder.

As her son’s truancy increased, the school referred him to juvenile court. He was required to participate in counseling and court ordered to enroll in an online school, where according to Chris he did the bare minimum. Eventually, he was removed from the online school for failure to complete work. He was required to reenroll in the traditional public school, where he continued to struggle. The school authorities suspended him at least twice for drug use. The poor attendance and suspensions made it difficult for Chris’ son to keep up in school. He eventually dropped out of school but was able to pass the General Educational Development (GED) examination.
Drew was a well-educated professional who worked for a state university. She and her husband, who was a stepfather to her son, had jobs that required them to drive out of town; she believed this may have attributed to her son’s poor attendance. Drew’s family moved to the current community sometime between her son’s fifth and sixth grade years. Drew believed that as early as fourth grade her son suffered from ADHD, which interfered with his ability to focus on his education; as a result, his teachers administered some sort of test, but the results were inconclusive. Drew described her son as inattentive but not hyperactive. In ninth grade, he participated in soccer and basketball but was later cut from both teams. Drew believed that this negatively influenced the type of friends with whom he associated as well as his attitude toward school.

Her son accumulated 19 full-day absences during his senior year in high school. He also had a history of skipping individual class periods. During his senior year he was absent from first period 22 times, fourth period 29 times, sixth period 23 times, and seventh period 27 times. He turned 18 in October of his senior year, adversely affecting the importance he placed on finishing school. As a senior in high school, Drew’s son developed an interest in creating music tapes, and as a disk jockey (DJ) at a local club, he was introduced to the music business through his work associates. Drew’s son dated a local girl, and his interest in his music and his affection for his girlfriend created a distraction that “overshadowed his academic life.” These influences as well as struggles between Drew’s son and his stepfather caused such strife in the household that Drew was
physically ill for over a year. Fortunately, her son eventually graduated from school and pursued a musical career at the time of this writing.

Jamie and her husband were the parents of four children, who qualified for the free lunch program. She was a homemaker, and her husband worked outside the home. She described herself as a good student in school but stated that her husband struggled and dropped out during his senior year in high school. Jamie was identified as a participant for this study based on her son’s high school attendance record, which indicated that he accumulated 24 absences during his junior year and another 22 absences during his senior year. Jamie stated that all of her children had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). She felt that the intervention specialist kept her well-informed of her son’s progress and attendance.

At times during the interview, Jamie stated that her son’s absences were primarily the result of illness, but at other times she stated that he “ditched out” of school. She said that her children were not sick often, but when they were, all of them were ill at the same time. According to Jamie, her son began to “slack off” during his junior year. Jamie drove her son to school and dropped him off, but he left the school to hang out with his friends off campus. Eventually, Jamie took her son out of the traditional public high school and enrolled him in a local online public high school. Jamie’s son was enrolled in the online school for approximately 4–6 months. He struggled with the content and without the support and structure of the traditional high school, he failed. Jamie removed her son from the online school and reenrolled him in the traditional high school sometime
during his junior year. With the help and support of the intervention specialist, they were able to get him back on track and graduated from high school on time.

Robin was a single mother of one son and one daughter. Her mother assisted her in raising her children at some point after the death of the children’s father. Robin was a working mother, who had earned an associate’s degree. She said that she experienced both academic and attendance struggles as a child. She stated that she often fabricated attendance notes and subsequently skipped many days of school. I identified Robin for this study because of her son’s 33 accumulated absences during his sophomore year and 32 absences during his senior year. Robin described her son as a smart but lazy student. She felt that his laziness interfered with his ability to complete his assignments. Robin’s son displayed no academic interest; however, he was interested in baseball but did not make the high school team.

Robin’s son was enrolled at a private elementary school, attended a public middle school, was homeschooled during his middle school years, attended a traditional public high school for ninth and tenth grades, was court ordered to attend an online school during eleventh grade, and returned to the traditional high school for his senior year. Robin remembered that her son’s elementary school years were a positive time during their lived, and she attributed this to the assistance she received from her mother before her death. Robin believed that her son changed after the death of his grandfather. She and her son had a tumultuous relationship during his high school years, the direct result
of his theft of items from their home. Robin’s son graduated from high school but found keeping a job after graduation difficult.

Tracy and her husband were the parents of five children. I invited her to participate in this study based on her daughter’s accumulated 40 absences during her senior year in high school. As a child, Tracy attended a private school through middle school and described herself as bored with school. She attended a public high school. She enjoyed her Latin class and attended it regularly but remembers skipping her other classes. Her daughter attended both a traditional and an online public high school; however, she was unsuccessful in the online school and eventually reenrolled in the traditional public high school.

Tracy described her daughter as sweet and funny but a sociopath who took advantage of people. She did not take a personal interest in her friends but instead used relationships for personal gain. Tracy believed that her daughter’s attendance was much worse than the record indicated. She stated that her daughter forged attendance notes and was often able to convince her and school personnel that she was at school when she was not. Tracy’s daughter often left the house at night and was found twice in another city. She was arrested for shoplifting twice during her high school years. Tracy disciplined her daughter when she was in trouble at home or at school, but doing so did little to change her daughter’s behavior. She continued to skip school, sneak out of the house, and disobey school rules. Tracy stated that she and her daughter had much in common and believed that they inherited their behaviors from Tracy’s father. Tracy’s daughter
graduated from high school and worked at a local restaurant as a waitress. (See Table 1 for a summary of the description of the participants.)

Table 1

**Characteristics of Family, Mother, and Child**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Educational Attainment of Mother</th>
<th>Secondary Educational Attainment of Child</th>
<th>Number of Schools Child Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Divorced/separated</td>
<td>Not disclosed</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Step-family</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Step-family</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Some postsecondary</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>2 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>First marriage</td>
<td>Poverty threshold</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Widowed; Single</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>5 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>First marriage</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Interviews**

Each interview was set up on an individual basis and took place at the date, time, and location of the participants’ choosing (Cone & Foster, 1993). Five of the interviews took place in the participants’ homes; one interview took place at a local high school. The procedure used for each interview was the same (see Appendix C). Each interview began with a complete review of the consent to participate and audio consent forms (see Appendices D and E). I read each form aloud to the participants, giving them an opportunity to ask questions. Next, with each one I reviewed the role of the participant
and her right to withdraw from the interview or study at any time; I acquired written consent from each participant to proceed with the interview.

**Interview Structure**

Developing interview questions as a tool was helpful in guiding participants back in time so that they could recall events related to their children’s school experience. Such a guide “offer[ed] the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 94); therefore, I used semi structured interview questions (see Appendix C) to guide participants in their recollections of interactions with their children or personnel at their children’s schools as they related to episodes of chronic absenteeism.

The use of semistructured questions helped to focus participants’ memories on circumstances related to their children’s chronic absenteeism while also allowing participants to explore experiences related to this issue (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Once a participant granted permission to record the interview, I turned on the recording device; the interview opened with a review of the high school attendance record of the participant’s child. The participant was then given a moment to respond to the attendance record. The interview proceeded with a conversation in which predetermined questions were used to guide the participants in their recollections of both their children’s school experiences and their personal experiences in the school environment from the perspective both of a parent and a former student. The conversation with each participant included a review of recollections of the child’s school attendance, the child’s high school experience, and experiences that each participant
believed had an impact on the child’s school experience. Participants were encouraged to speak about their school experiences and were then given opportunities to compare their own school experience with that of their children’s school experience. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were encouraged to share additional information that they felt was important in order to clarify their experiences in the school environment, ways to reduce student absences from school, ways to improve students’ access to educational opportunities, and ways to improve home–school communication and collaboration.

Determining sample size can be both difficult and critical in the research process. Creswell (2007) stated, “In grounded theory study, the researcher chooses participants who can contribute to the development of theory” (p. 128). Patton (1990) argued that meaningful qualitative research depends less on sample size and more on the richness of data gathered. In a review of 52 dissertations in which the writers used the grounded theory method, sample size ranged from as few as three (Kaczmarczyk, 2005) to as many as 50 (Knapik, 2006). Clearly, little consensus exists as to what sample size is sufficient for this type of research. For the purpose of this study, the participant sample size was determined to be sufficient at the point at which the categories became saturated with data so that no new data contributed to the emerging theory.

**Theoretical Sampling**

Grounded theory analysis requires theoretical sampling to serve as the basis for identifying emerging concepts or themes (Charmaz, 2006) and memo writing can be helpful in exploring them. After the first interview, participants claimed ownership of
blame with regard to the incidents of chronic absenteeism so that I mistakenly thought that the emerging theory would be one on the assignment of blame. This thinking affected the way I extracted data from subsequent interviews and the resulting development of categories. I struggled with this concept as I worked through my data, and I recorded this struggle in my memo writing; however, through the process of theoretical sampling, I discovered my mistake.

The second participant interview was rich with data, but the data did not quite match the themes that emerged from the first interview. During this second participant interview and while listening to the tapes afterward, I perceived the passion in the voice of a parent who searched for answers that would help her guide her child. This interview caused me to struggle with my earlier assumption that the data would lead me to a theory on the assignment of blame. I continued to interview participants and placed the data into emerging categories, but at times I felt that I was forcing data into some of the early categories that centered on the concept of blame. I decided that I needed to take a step back. I reread the transcripts from the first and second interviews and realized that I needed to return to the second participant and request a second interview in order to follow up on this idea of assigning blame because I questioned earlier decisions I made in defining actions (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) advised researchers to “follow hunches about where to find data that [would] illuminate these categories and then go collect these data” (p. 103); therefore, I conducted a follow-up interview with the second participant on a hunch that I had missed something in my analysis of the data.
The second interview with this participant, which was 16 months after the first interview, was almost identical to the first; however, I discovered that this parent did not necessarily blame anyone for her son’s struggles. Instead, she shared her frustrations regarding events that eventually eroded her confidence in the system. This helped me understand that during the process of coding and analyzing data, I had misinterpreted some, causing me to miss data in the third through sixth interviews because I had been distracted by a red herring—the theme of assigning blame. Using the following question, “How does my coding reflect the incident” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 69), I went back through the earlier interviews and again conducted the process of coding and analyzing the data, which subsequently changed the make-up or properties of several categories and convinced me of the critical nature of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006).

In order to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher must employ methods to ensure “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 21). “Theoretical sampling involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and examining ideas through further empirical inquiry” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 102). The process requires “moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 103), and comparing emerging codes from one interview with codes that emerged from other interviews. Eventually, through the process of constant comparison, some codes gravitated toward others with similar properties and developed into various categories. I continued this process, comparing categories with categories, which eventually led to an emerging theory.
Data Collection

Informed Consent

Semistructured interview questions (Appendix C) guided the interview process. I began each interview by reviewing the informed consent forms. Each participant was interviewed individually and received a copy of the informed consent form. I read the consent form (Appendix D) word by word with the participant and gave each one an opportunity to ask questions. During the reading of the form, I explained how they were chosen for participation in this research study, the purpose of the study, what I hoped to accomplish from this study, and what participants would be asked to do. I explained the process of confidentiality, compensation, and the participant’s right to withdraw from the study at any time. I obtained each participant’s signature on the consent form and gave each participant a copy of the form. Next, I reviewed the audio consent form (Appendix E) with each participant. I offered participants a copy of their transcribed interviews and notified them of their right to request to hear the tape recording of the interview or to review a copy of the transcript. No participant indicated a desire to hear the tape recording of their interview or review their interview transcript. I asked each participant whether they had any questions. At this point, each participant usually asked a question related to their selection for the research project or a question regarding the number of absences their child had accumulated that qualified them for the study. I gave each participant a copy of his or her child’s school attendance and asked for permission to begin taping the interview.
Once each interview was completed, participants were asked whether they would be willing to review the transcript for accuracy. All participants declined. Next, the audio recording was transcribed. I completed a crosscheck of each transcription with the audio recording to ensure that the transcription matched the recording verbatim. I then began the data analysis as soon as possible after the interview but prior to the next one. The audio recordings were destroyed after the analyses were completed.

**Interview Questions**

Charmaz (2006) believed that researchers operate from the perspectives of their academic disciplines to provide a place from which to begin their research; although beginning from this vantage point may be appropriate, she said, the data must be allowed to point the way in which the research inquiry proceeds. She recommended employing intensive interviewing techniques in an effort to put the researcher in control of data collection and analysis. This form of interviewing allows the researcher to be flexible yet employ emergent techniques so that as “ideas and issues emerge during the interview [the researcher ] can immediately pursue these leads” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29). This helped participants communicate the manner in which they experienced the school environment with regard to their child’s chronic absenteeism as well as the effect that this experience had on their home life and relationship with their children. The way in which interview questions are constructed can have an impact on the type of data that is collected. According to Charmaz (2000), the researcher is required to “ask questions and follow hunches” (p. 514) about both participants and the collected data. Thus, I continually
returned to my research question: What are parents’ experiences in the school environment and how do they contribute to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism?

I engaged in intensive interviewing, also referred to as in-depth interviewing, because it allowed me to focus on the exploration of topics and participant experiences in an effort to locate incipient theories (Charmaz, 2006). “In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation” (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3). By using semistructured interview questions, I gained the data necessary to reach theoretical saturation.

Questions regarding participants’ experiences were designed to elicit their description of the way their understanding of this subject matter came about (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). When Corville-Smith et al. (1998) looked at absent students’ perceptions of school, they found that the primary variable marking the difference between attenders and nonattenders was student dissatisfaction with school. Lareau and Shumar (1996) and Sheppard (2005) found that the parents’ perception of their relationship with schools was a key to understanding the dynamics of parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. To this end, listening as parents described what took place when their children negotiated with them to gain permission for a school absence was vital to this study. Discerning whether a parent’s prior experiences with the educational system or with school personnel had any bearing on their decision-making process regarding their children’s absences was also important. As I listened to parents’ experiences, I
discovered the role that school leadership played in home–school relationships was important. Questions included the following (see Appendix C for complete list):

1. Thinking back to when your child was in high school, what do you recall about his or her attendance?
2. Can you recall why he or she missed so many days?
3. Do you recall whether you sometimes suspected that your child was not ill but asked you for permission to say home from school?
4. How did this (experience with school attendance issues) affect your relationship with your child?
5. Can you recall a similar experience from your own childhood? If so, tell me about that.
6. How do you feel you were treated by school personnel when dealing with your child’s attendance issues?
7. Could school personnel have done anything else to assist you or your child?

Data Collection Procedures

Constructivist grounded theory, which is based on the idea that “data and analyses are social constructions” (Hildebrand, 2007, p. 556), aims to show how participants construct meaning in particular situations. “The constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and [facilitates] both data and analysis . . . created from shared experiences and relationships with participants” (Charmaz, 2007, p. 130). Hence, the researcher is committed to this reciprocal relationship in order to create a balance or
counteract the imbalance of power that is traditionally part of the researcher–participant hierarchy. The researcher, together with the participant, uncovers data that help to explain, “how people construct actions and meanings” (Charmaz, 2007, p. 130); thus, the resulting theory is a coconstruction by both the researcher and the participant.

A researcher can acknowledge the value of participants’ contributions to the research in several ways. First, providing participants financial compensation for their time is one form of compensation used by some researchers. Second, helping participants gain access to needed resources is an additional way in which researchers can acknowledge a participant’s value to the construction of the research project. Third, a most powerful way a researcher can acknowledge the value of participants’ contributions, however, is to listen to their stories and share their experiences through the research process. I employed all three of these forms of compensation.

Five of the six participants openly expressed gratitude towards my interest in their children’s school experience. One participant stated that she hoped that something good would come from the research. Another participant requested assistance in obtaining information on a postsecondary welding training program. I followed up this request by mailing the participant an informational brochure and registration information for a local career technical program that provided a welding certification program, yet none of the participants was willing to assist with the process of member checking the inquiry.

During each interview I used certain initial open-ended questions in the form of guiding questions (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to encourage participants to
recollect and reflect on their experiences. Often parents chose a few events that helped to illustrate their experience with the school. I used follow-up questions and prompts as necessary until the parent’s full experience emerged and the necessary data were collected. Once the initial interview was completed and analyzed, I reviewed the tape in order to listen to the follow-up questions that I used during the interview to guide the participant. I then amended the interview protocol questions for subsequent interviews. For example, I used the information gathered from the first interview to guide interview questions for the second interview. This improved the data gathering by reformulating questions to allow participants to share their stories, which led to an abundance of descriptive codes emerging from the second interview. This process helped participants develop and define information that contributed to category development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

Data analysis, the process of reviewing data to identify similarities and differences in order to generate, develop, and verify concepts, begins with the first instance of data collection and takes place over time (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). “Coding generates the bones of [the] analysis” (Charmaz 2006, p. 45); it is a fundamental part of grounded theory data analysis with which the researcher defines data. Unlike in quantitative research with its preconceived categories or codes, in a grounded theory the researcher “creates qualitative codes by defining what he or she sees in the data” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 605). “Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and
developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). The analysis of grounded theory data is accomplished through two types of coding: substantive coding and theoretical coding.

**Coding Process**

I made handwritten notes during the first two interviews in order to facilitate the identification of emerging themes, and a transcriptionist transcribed the first two interviews. Once the process for transcribing the audio recording was completed, I reviewed the transcript in order to ensure that the transcript was a verbatim representation. The process used to transcribe each of the first two interview recordings took approximately three to four weeks, which caused a significant delay in getting transcripts back for analysis before I could schedule subsequent interviews. In order to address this delay, I switched from a transcriptionist to a high quality digital voice recorder and transcribing software. Using this method, I was able to transcribe the last four interview recordings as well as the one follow-up interview recording in a more timely fashion. To ensure the accuracy of the transcript, I simultaneously reviewed the written transcript with the audio recording in order to compare the written transcript with the audio file. When necessary, I made corrections to the written record in order to ensure they were verbatim representations. This helped to ensure the written text matched the audio file and gave me an opportunity to experience the interview a second time. Through this process, certain codes emerged.
Substantive Coding

The three phases of substantive coding are initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding. Initial coding, also referred to as open coding, is the means by which the researcher categorizes data. Focused coding is the process by which the researcher uses the most “directed, selective, and conceptual” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57) codes in the data in order to develop categories that make sense. Axial coding is a type of coding used by the researcher to dismantle data and reassemble it according to the role the data play in the various categories developing during the analysis (Stauss & Corbin, 1998); it answers the questions “when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60).

Initial Open Coding

The initial phase of analysis involves naming the data, by word, line, or segment (Charmaz, 2006). Each transcript was formatted using a system similar to the Cornell note-taking method. Each line contained 15 or fewer words in order to conduct a line-by-line analysis of the data and provide a column for notations. The purpose of choosing 15 or fewer words was solely to assist with the initial coding process. At no time did the number of words in a line limit or interfere with the coding process. For example, if emerging data began midline and continued to the next line, I coded the data to include all relevant ideas regardless of the line in which it was found. Data took the form of descriptive phrases. I reviewed each line manually, looking for data that emerged or had special meaning to me, in order to tell the story of the participants’ experiences with their
children’s school attendance (Charmaz, 2006). I made notes in the notation section to the left of each line from which relevant data emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This system was useful because it allowed me to pull out codes and set them in the column alongside the line where it was found in order to “ask questions of the data” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 96) as the analysis and coding proceeded. The following questions guided this process: “What is the main concern . . . faced by the participants? What is actually happening here? What does this data indicate?” (Holton, 2007, p. 275). By asking these questions of the data, codes emerged that helped me to gain insight into the participants’ experiences. I used line-by-line coding in an effort “to gain full theoretical accounting of the data” (Charmaz, 1985, p. 113).

Initial codes were handwritten on individual note cards with a coding system that later helped to identify the participants with which they were associated for further review and analysis. As the number of codes increased, a more orderly system for organizing and recording this information was clearly necessary. I recorded the codes in a spreadsheet that facilitated the ordering and reordering of codes as well as searching for information. Each code entered into the spreadsheet was given a corresponding number that was later used to help locate the code within the transcribed interview for further examination. Using a spreadsheet was also helpful in organizing the codes for analysis and category development.

The spreadsheet was a useful tool for sorting and keeping track of data. As the amount of data increased, the spreadsheet helped me track decisions I made about each
piece of data, including where the data originated and decisions I made while sorting it. Many times, I questioned myself about decisions I had made in regard to the way I sorted a piece of data, and needed to see the data in the context of the interview. I wanted to ensure I assigned meaning to the piece of data in accordance with the meaning assigned by the participant. The spreadsheet, which allowed me to track this, included a field for identifying the participant, recording the data, describing the data, defining who or what the data referenced, defining the effect of the experience, and defining the subcategory and category for the specific data.

Once I analyzed an entire interview using this system, I extracted lines of data and emerging codes and entered them into the spreadsheet. I printed the data onto note cards and then organized into similar groupings, ideas or concepts. The codes on each card were then compared with codes on other cards in order to “find similarities and differences” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54); I organized according to the findings. At times an in vivo code would emerge, relating to the properties of those codes in a grouping. At other times, I coded the grouping according to the properties that emerged from the codes organized in the grouping. The process of initial coding led to a large amount of data that “required continuous organizing” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 97).

**In vivo codes.** In vivo codes, which are often used in initial coding comprise codes that represent “participants’ meanings of their views and action,” deriving from the actual words or phrases in order to capture the essence of a participant’s meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). In vivo coding facilitates the emergence of the participant’s
voice. All codes were eventually condensed or “unpacked,” as described by Charmaz (2006, p. 55). In the current study these types of codes consisted of the term given by the participant that may have been a general term used by others; however, they evoked a certain meaning for the participant. Examples of rich codes that emerged from this inquiry include the following: *it was him, traveling through a tunnel, he didn’t make the cut, and no man’s land.* The use of in vivo codes permitted a greater understanding of the meanings given by the participants and facilitated further comparison between data and emerging categories. During the initial coding phase, I used in vivo codes to describe developing categories, and later, emerging themes. I eventually sorted and synthesized the emerging codes to represent larger amounts of data.

**Focused coding.** The next step in substantive coding is a more selective focused coding in which the researcher looks at the most frequently recurring codes found after the initial coding phase. This process entails the use of the most significant codes that emerge from the data. In this step, words were compared within the interview and with words from subsequent interviews “to stimulate . . . thinking about properties and dimensions and to direct. . . theoretical sampling” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 78). This is true for the analysis of phrases and sentences as well. This process required that I make decisions about codes extrapolated through the process of initial coding to determine which codes made most analytic sense in emerging categories.

The key task in this phase of coding is “the integration of categories” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 98) as demonstrated in the following example. During the early initial
coding phase, the category other schools emerged as participants shared their children’s experience at previous schools. Some participants recalled the positive interactions with teachers and staff members. At some point in time, however, a participant’s life circumstances required that the family move to the new school. For some participants, the change in the educational environment had an impact on the child’s outlook on schooling. As I explored this experience, I discovered that the physical school had not caused the positive or negative effect on the child: Instead, the environment and the culture of the school contributed to the positive or negative effect on the child. For some students this effect became an obstacle to a positive school experience, and for others the effect was a bridge to a successful educational experience. Through the constant comparison and grouping of “low-level conceptual codes” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 98), an early category such as other schools collapsed and eventually migrated to the subcategory educational environments, which eventually led to the theoretical category schooling barriers and bridges.

Axial coding. Whereas initial coding permits the researcher to take the raw data and break it down to reveal many ideas and concepts, axial coding is the reassembling of data in order to flush out relationships that exist in the data. Also known as categorizing, axial coding allowed me to cluster codes “around a specific axis” (Harry, Sturges, Kilingner, 2005, p. 5) through the process of constant comparison by relating categories to subcategories (Charmaz, 2006). Scott (2004) referred to axial coding as an investigative process. Through interpretation, the researcher identifies “conceptual
categories that reflect commonalities” (Harry et al., 2005, p. 5). As I reviewed the categories that developed, I found that some were robust with data and well defined; however, other categories held less data and emerged as subcategories that defined other categories. As I compared the categories, some were placed in others that better defined the developing concepts and themes. Categories that were not seen as consequences, became dimensions of the consequences, thus the process of constant comparison continued. Analytic memo writing was important during this part of the process. By writing memos, I was challenged categories and processes by asking, “So what?” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010, p. 671). I also looked for gaps among the categories. Wherever I found them, I continued to conduct theoretical sampling by reviewing transcripts, the coding process, and memos until theoretical saturation was achieved (Charmaz, 2006).

**Theoretical coding.** Theoretical coding, the final stage of coding in grounded theory analysis, is the practice of conceptualizing the relationships of substantive codes “as hypothesis to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Theoretical codes help the researcher identify relationships among categories developed during the substantive coding process (Charmaz, 2006). They are necessary for a researcher to move from substantive data to theory building; in other words theoretical coding is the act of moving from description to abstraction. It is the “conceptual mode of analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 66) and eventually leads the researcher to theory development.
Early during the focused coding and theme development phase, the idea emerged that people construct their perceptions according to the effects that an experience has on their being. Later during the theoretical coding phase as I reviewed my memos, I found a memo I had written earlier about this idea. As I reviewed the substantive codes and memos, I realized that the parents’ experiences were their perceptions of the events that took place and that their perceptions seemed to have some defining effect on how they experienced the school environment. As I delved into this idea further, I found that each action, nonaction, and interaction developed in each person a life perception that framed how he or she interpreted an experience. People’s reactions to the way they perceive reality dictate the manner in which they act or react to a situation. For some, the perceived actions or interactions that were deemed positive gave the parent an overall feeling of support that tended to add to the parent–school experience; however, for others, when the perceived actions, nonaction or interactions were deemed as negative, the parents’ perceptions of the school environment limited their ability to benefit from the parent–school experience. Each action, nonaction, or interaction either added or subtracted from the parents’ perceptions of the school environment. This idea became important later during the theory development stage.

**The Constant Comparative Method**

Conceptualization in grounded theory seldom occurs accidentally. Instead, the constant comparative method allows undeveloped theory to mature. I began analysis as soon as I received my first transcript by comparing codes with codes and incidents with
incidents in this first transcript. Doing so resembled fitting jigsaw pieces of a puzzle together in an effort to find exactly where each piece fit. Memo writing became very important at this point. As I made decisions regarding where each piece fit, writing memos provided me with a record of reasons that I made various decisions, and the memos allowed me to reflect on these decisions so that I could reexamine them when necessary.

With the constant comparative method of data analysis, the most significant codes materialize; these represent themes and facilitate improved definition of larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). Some themes help to describe the properties of a category, but other themes are subsumed by another category or are eliminated altogether. As significant codes surfaced in this study, I used them to help make analytical sense of the data in the code groupings, which often led to better-defined categories (see Table 2). These significant codes helped to direct the analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011), thereby making connections within the data. Slowly, patterns emerged that eventually led to the formation of 31 initial categories. The constant comparative method required a continuous organization and reorganization of data. During this phase of coding, categories temporarily emerged, only to be subsumed by a better-defined category that more clearly represented the concepts contained within the category. Through the process of constant comparative method, initial coding and focused coding took place at times simultaneously.
Memo Writing

Memo writing is a crucial element in grounded theory research. It is a fundamental practice for researcher engagement, which defines the path to grounded theory development (Lempert, 2007) serves as a roadmap that will either show where the researcher plans to go or evidence of where she or he has been. “By writing memos continuously throughout the research process, the researcher explores, explicates, and theorizes these emergent patterns” (Lempert, 2007, p. 245). Hence, in the current study early data analysis took place through the use of memo writing. I used the memos throughout the research process as reflections (Merriam & Associates, 2002) to identify issues related to subjectivity and reliability, methods, field notes, problem solving, analysis, decision making (Schram, 2006), and as a way for me to examine assumptions that I had made during this process. Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) described this process as a way to “make the necessary meaningful linkages between the personal and emotional . . . and the stringent intellectual operations” of the research project (p. 10).

Memos may take the shape of free flowing ideas (Charmaz, 2006), or they may be used to help direct the inquiry (Schram, 2006).

Memos must be written for a purpose other than reading. Lembert (2007) asserted that integrating memos into one’s analysis can seem overwhelming: “It is hard intellectual work to keep categories analytical and to clarify analyses in memos” (Lembert, 2007, p. 258). Memos often took the form of narrative statements regarding the formation and properties of categories, epiphanies related to concepts, and
experiences with empirical data. Memos were often full of data that helped to bring patterns to light and were written throughout the research process.

I used memo writing throughout the research project. Initially, I wrote memos as an exercise or requirement of the research method. At times, they were mechanical, created because they were a part of the process. Later, memo writing was a way to diffuse the frustration I experienced working through the proposal and IRB process. Once the research itself was under way, I used memo writing as a way to record decisions made about data and as a way to record, confront, or address thoughts or opinions that emerged during and after participant interviews.

For example, after conducting the first interview, thoughts regarding the assignment of blame surfaced. Using memo writing, I recalled this interview. I felt an internal struggle with the assignment of blame. I asked myself, “Why didn’t this mother do more for her son? Why does she blame the principal for this?” Here, I was aware that I risked contaminating the data with such thoughts and knew I had to confront them.

As I waited to receive the transcript, one theme kept coming back to me, something I had not thought of before—the assignment of blame. When referring to her conversation with the principal regarding her son’s absences she said of the principal, “What does he care? It’s not his child.” She used phrases such as “They didn’t care. He was just another number. I wished they had done something.” (Swartz, 2012)

In order to come to grips with the assignment of blame, I referred back to earlier material on Bourdieu’s theory (1973) on the role of the educational system in the
reproduction and distribution of cultural capital. This later helped me to confront my thoughts about blame and better comprehend the parent’s frustration with the principal. I understood that the principal might represent a system that was responsible for the accumulation and transmission of knowledge.

The story that this parent shared indicated that she valued education for its potential benefit for her child, “I want him to be so much, you know; all parents want their kids to be better than who they are and what they have and what they can achieve.” Here, memo writing became a tool to help me confront instances of possible bias or research distortions and to address them. “In the case of qualitative inquiry, the investigator needs to do a balancing act dealing with biases” (Rajendran, 2001, p. 15). Researchers are human and, therefore, prone to certain biases. “Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 34). Memo writing—and later recorded memos—allowed me to have a conversation with myself in order to keep such biases in check.

Memo writing was an effective tool for recording and later reviewing decisions made during the coding and analysis process. For example, as noted above, the theme of assigning blame emerged early in the initial coding process as a possible area of exploration. As I wrote memos on assigning blame, I soon understood that the idea of blame had more to do with my bias and less to do with the participant’s experience. The participant shared an experience that was negative and for her demonstrated a lack of caring on the part of the principal; however, these feelings were related to this parent’s
frustration that her 18-year-old son was able to withdraw himself from school because of a state law and her perception that the principal did nothing to stop this. Lynn stated, “I wish they would have done something but there’s no way they could have made him stay in school. He was 18, and he did what he wanted, I guess.” As memo writing continued, themes such as feelings of being let down, lack of caring, the parent’s feeling frustration over difficulties with the child, and refusal to attend, soon emerged. Memo writing helped me initially as I developed this inquiry. It helped me to keep track of my decisions when making comparisons in my data, how I choose to focus on developing themes or categories, and it helped me to confront struggles that took place during the analysis phase and theory development (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical Sorting

Theoretical sorting, which is the act of classifying theoretical memos in a logical order that engenders the theoretical framework for the presentation of the grounded theory (Holton, 2007). As sorting closely reflects the flow of empirical experience, the smoother it appears to both the researcher and the reader (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) recommended that the researcher sort the memos by hand in an area large enough to enable him or her to see the theoretical codes. Memos should be sorted by the title of the category. Once the first category was in place in this study, I took the next theoretical memo and compared it to the first to determine the properties of the second memo. At this point I asked the following questions:

1. How do the memos compare?
2. Does this comparison spark new ideas?
3. Have new relationships appeared between memos?
4. What leads do I gain by sorting the memo?
5. How do these fit together?

It was during the process of sorting theoretical memos that I began to understand the relationship that existed between each category and the nature of the emerging theory. I wrote each memo and highlighted the writing to indicate relationships among ideas. Sometimes the ideas or concepts stood on their own properties, and at other times, they were consumed by another category. This process helped me to integrate memos into a written draft of the research project.

**Diagramming**

Visualizing concepts through diagramming is central to grounded theory methodology. Although Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that a “matrix can aid researchers in making theoretical sampling decisions” (p. 190), Charmaz (2006) believed that a matrix forced the researcher to move data and analysis in a preestablished direction and favored diagramming instead. She believed that diagrams were useful tools in grounded theory research. Diagrams “create a visual display of what researchers do and do not know” about the phenomenon under study” (Lambert, 2007, p. 258). It is an integral part of theorizing. “Diagrams can offer concrete images of . . . ideas” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 117). Charmaz (2006) stated that grounded theory diagramming takes many
forms, including charts, webs, and situational maps. “Diagrams can enable [the researcher] to see the relative power, scope, and direction of the categories in your analysis as well as the connections among them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 118). Diagramming played a key role in the analysis of my research categories, theoretical sorting, and the integration of memos into theory building.

The diagramming process began early in the analysis, immediately after extracting data from the first interview. Certain codes surfaced relating to the experience of this participant’s child: *learning difficulty, crying, lack of caring, dropping out,* and *slipping through the cracks.* Early in vivo codes included *slipped through the cracks,* *no one cared,* and *all parents want better for their kids.* When I received the written transcript of each interview, I identified codes, then wrote them on note cards, and then sorted them according to their properties. As the number of notes cards with similar properties grew, I placed the notes cards on 2.5 ft. x 2 ft. easel paper and affixed them to the walls of my home office and hallways according the emerging themes developing on the paper. At times, certain codes related to the properties described by the cards on the sheets of paper and therefore rose to a level that they came to define the codes on that sheet.

Often an in vivo code related to the properties defined by the cards on the sheet. For example, the sheet with cards that described certain attributes of a child came to be labeled *It was him.* The in vivo code, *it was him* came from participant dialogue during the first interview. While exploring the cause of the change in this participant’s child
from his experience in one school to his experience in another school, I asked Lynn what changed. She said, “But it was just him I think. He wouldn’t, ’cause he went to private school here, too, for the first year and they kicked him out ’cause he was just bad.” The more we explored this idea, it was just him, Lynn shared that her son probably exhibited similar behaviors at his first school but thought that personnel at the first school approached the difficulties from an interventionist perspective. “They would have him come out and help him read and have tutors and the teacher would take the time ’cause it was a smaller class.” The approach taken at the first school was to provide assistance, whereas at the second school the approach taken was that her son could do the work but refused to do it. Eventually, the participant’s son to acted out, resulting in permanent expulsion from the second school.

The data cards on the chart paper for the theme I labeled it was him included phrases like “a lot of it was his own fault, ADHD, can’t make a square peg fit a round hole, he always had his head on straight, he was just lazy, he’d fidget, he was not respectful, and moonlighter.” This data represents the collective idea it was him, a subcategory in the category of child’s influences according to parent. As these sheets with data accumulated, I arranged them according to their relationship with other sheets of paper. Each time a group of codes accumulated that represented a concept, the codes were assembled on a chart sheet. Sometimes I labeled the sheet according to the properties contained in the data, and at other times no specific label rose to the top of the list. As I identified more codes and organized them onto sheets of chart paper, I placed
each sheet on the wall according to the way its properties and conditions were related to the properties and conditions on the sheets surrounding it. Eventually, 34 sheets of easel paper with codes hung on the walls, each according to its relationship with other codes.

Codes in the subcategory *it was him* appeared on such a sheet. The codes on this sheet described the following: actions that interfered with the child’s life, child refusing, impacting condition, child behaving a certain way, and the way actions are affecting the child’s life. *It was him* became a subcategory in the category child’s influences according to parent, which also included the subcategories things changed and influences of others. Each of these subcategories helped to define influences on the child that impacted the child’s ability to access the resources necessary to be successful in school, according to the parent (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Coding Process and Category Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial groupings</th>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Focused Coding</th>
<th>Emergent Categories</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to positive school experiences</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Getting connected; communication; behaviors that indicate caring &amp; uncaring relationships; effects of educational environments</td>
<td>Barriers &amp; Bridges</td>
<td>Bridges &amp; Barriers</td>
<td>Bridges &amp; Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter (Bridges to positive school experiences)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get him connected (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Causing lack of connection; connecting child w/support; improving desire to stay connected</td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Bridges &amp; Barriers</td>
<td>Bridges &amp; Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should have been some kind of program (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think they slip through the cracks (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School consequences</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Efforts to communicate; not communicating, needing better communication, communicating for neg. reasons, talking with school will help</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just a number (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncaring (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Behaviors that indicate caring &amp; uncaring relationships</td>
<td>Caring &amp; uncaring behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other schools</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Effect of ineffective, traditional, private, or home schooling</td>
<td>Educational Environments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not school-wise</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Effect, impact or similarity of child's/parent's school experience; Efforts/impact of enforcing school rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated/didn't - where are they now</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Effect, impact or similarity of child's/parent's school experience; Efforts/impact of enforcing school rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes about school</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Attending, avoiding, believing child's explanation, deceiving, defining appropriate excuse, failing to succeed, feelings of resentment, giving up, interfering behaviors, lacking parent enforcement, motivation, behavior onset, reoccurring medical issues, resisting rules, uninformed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School-wise</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes about school attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>School avoidance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family situation (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Child/parent/family experiencing difficulty due to family stressors, parent feeling judged; support for schooling; working interferes w/family obligation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working and everything (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions of last resort</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal troubles</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Lacking support from legal system, resulting in or from legal trouble</td>
<td>Experiences resulting from legal issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent perceptions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Feeling of being let down, frustration, lack of support/caring, despair, not enough assistance, not knowing, not being valued, race kept them from receiving assistance; hoping for positive change; similar experience as a child</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental aspirations for children</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Blaming self for lack of child's success, lacking ability to force child, hoping for positive outcome, lacking success as an adult, similar experience as child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All parents want their kids to have better (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Hopes &amp; Concerns</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Downward spiral</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You see the other side of him (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Impact or condition of child's behavior, interests or decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It was just him (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If he could have planned where we could have gone (in vivo)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When things changed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Beginning, causing or resulting from when things changed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moved things got bad (in vivo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toxic Elements that Effect the Development of Bridges</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Stressors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family dynamics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>的影响</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was him</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences Upon Child Accord-ing to Parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Influence of others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence of others</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>disenfranchisement due to lack or neg. relationship; interference due to experience or relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed category w/codes describe attributes of learning difficulties &amp; disabilities (diagnosed/undiagnosed but assumed by parent)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Moved to following areas: Getting connected; It was him; Caring; Uncaring; Family Stressors; Parent experiences; Attitudes about school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Much of the social research conducted today has the potential to have some impact on the lives and experiences of human beings (Merriam, 1998). Because of this impact practitioners require some assurances that the research contains some semblance of validity and trustworthiness. These features are very important to researchers who wish to have their work looked upon as valuable; readers of the research want to know the extent to which they can rely on assertions made by the researcher. When evaluating the credibility of qualitative research, the reader wants to know whether the research is credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Charmaz (2006) stated that credibility can be achieved by the “systematic comparisons between observations and between categories” (p. 182) and thorough evidence in order to support the theory. Rubin and Rubin (2005) use the word transparency to describe credibility. They maintain that transparency is achieved through a process of carefully maintaining records, memos and recordings which could be used by others (as long as confidentiality is ensured) to verify ones research (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Several strategies can be used to foster the credibility of social research. This study will employ the use of four techniques: memo writing, member checks, peer debriefing and an audit trail.
Transparency

I have made a full disclosure of my theoretical sensitivity, and I have provided detailed information regarding both my personal and professional background. My relationship with the school that provided the setting for this study was thoroughly reviewed by the IRB process, and requirements were put in place and fulfilled in order to safeguard participants. I have given a complete description of the process that I used to identify participants as well as a thorough depiction of the interview, coding, analysis, and theory development process that I used as a part of this inquiry.

Peer Review

Peer review and debriefing provides an audit of the researcher’s work. They are useful tools for testing a researcher’s reasoning, question research decisions, and allow for catharsis (Lincoln & Guba, 1998). In an effort to detect researcher bias, I employed the assistance of three colleagues to conduct a peer review and debriefing of my analysis. One was a veteran assistant principal with seven years of experience as an administrator, 13 years of experience as a guidance counselor and over eight years as a classroom teacher. The second assistant principal had three years of experience as an administrator and eight years of experience as a classroom teacher. The third assistant principal was new to the field of administration; however, he had nine years of experience as a classroom teacher. I also elicited the assistance of five peers with various backgrounds to conduct a peer review of my written inquiry. These colleagues were a graduate student, a teacher, an assistant principal, a retired director of student services and a retired director.
of secondary curriculum, all with a general understanding of research in terms of its practical application in the setting.

Peer debriefing is the “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session . . . for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Using both insiders and an outsider for peer debriefing provided valuable insights and feedback to ensure the credibility of my work.

Audit Trail

An audit generally consists of raw data, analysis products, data reconstruction products, memos, and all other research related products. Audit trails help researchers keep a record of their decision-making process that takes place throughout the study. My audit trail consisted of transcribed interviews, deconstructed data, a diagram of the coding process and diagram development, spreadsheets with research codes, student attendance tables, and memos. These research-related products provided an in-depth trail of decisions, thoughts, impressions, conceptual ideas, struggles, and achievements that provided a record to ensure transparency of my work.

Summary

In this chapter I have presented the research questions and the method used to answer them. In addition, I explained the assumptions and the rationale for this qualitative design. In an effort to provide full disclosure, I have provided an explanation of my role and background as well as the process that I used to ensure the credibility of the research. This chapter also provided a description of the participants, a description of
the setting, the demographic profile of the community and school district where the research was conducted. I discussed the process and safeguards regarding participant selection and sampling procedures and clarified data collection procedures, the interview protocol, and data analysis procedures. I discussed the issues of trustworthiness and validity. Finally, the rationale for the contributions to the research, including significance to the field of education and the research site, concluded this section.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 4 is organized into three sections, the first of which provides brief overviews of the findings and of the emergent theory as well as an explanation of the parents’ definition of good attendance. The second and third sections cover two themes that emerged from participants’ experiences. The first theme, bridges and barriers to school attendance, focuses on aspects of the school environment that contributed to parents’ perception of it. Generally, these are factors over which school personnel had some influence. The second theme, circumstances detrimental to the development of bridges, focuses on aspects of the social environment of the parent and student that negatively affected parents’ access to the school environment or their attitude toward it. Generally, these are aspects of the parent’s and child’s lives over which school personnel had little influence.

Overview of Findings

Through the process of diagramming, two themes emerged from analysis: (a) bridges and barriers to school attendance and (b) elements detrimental to the development of bridges (see Figure 1). The core category, bridges and barriers, yielded subcategories that define influences found in the school environment: connectedness, communication, caring–uncaring relationships, educational environment, and being school-wise. The second theme, elements detrimental to the development of bridges, yielded two categories: family stressors and influences upon the child according to the parent. These
categories represent aspects that constituted the social environment of the student and family. Subcategories under family stressors center on dynamic forces that strained family relationships and resources: family dynamics and legal troubles. Influences upon the child according to the parent focus on circumstances described by parents that influenced the children’s attendance; subcategories are as follows: it was him/her, things changed, and influences of others.

**An Overview of the Emergent Theory**

Understanding how parents experienced the school environment when dealing with issues of their children’s chronic absenteeism requires a perspective similar to theirs. As demonstrated in Figure 2., as parents experience the school environment, their perception of those experiences are typically based on a confluence of events instead of a single event. Experiences which most affected parent perception were a general sense of connectedness, communication, experiences with parent-school or child-school relationships, the overall educational environment, and a positive sense of being school-wise (school belonging or school success). Actions or interactions that parents view as positive give them an overall feeling of support that adds to the parent–school experience. Similarly, when parents deem the actions, nonaction or interactions as negative, their perception of the school environment becomes limited and interferes with their ability to benefit from the parent–school experience. When parents perceive parent-school interactions as mostly positive, these experience help to build bridges that support growth as well as a generally positive view of the school environment. When parents perceive
the experiences as mostly negative access to a positive school environment thus perceived to be limited, which creates barriers that interfere with a parent or child’s ability to benefit from the school environment.

In addition, certain social forces, that is, stressors or influences on children and parents from outside the school environment, are also at work. Often these social forces interfere with a student or parent’s ability to access support services that could mitigate the negative impact of certain barriers. Over time, these experiences define the child’s school experience. For some parents, the more negative and demanding the social forces are on their lives, the greater their diminishing effect on the way they experience the school environment. Thus, when a parent perceives the school environment as negative

*Figure 1* Analytical framework of substantive theory diagram.
and suffers the effect of negative social forces, they find it difficult to enforce school attendance policies.

**How Parents Defined Good Attendance**

Chapters 1 and 2 included legislative, court, administrative, and research perspectives on habitual truancy, chronic truancy, habitual absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism. The Ohio Revised Code covers school attendance in terms of habitual and chronic truancy and the responsibility of school personnel to address truancy in their districts. Ohio law requires each board of education to determine when a child has been truant by defining excused and unexcused absences. As shown in Chapter 2, researchers have investigated the negative impact of chronic absenteeism and truancy and the importance of regular school attendance. Because the current research focuses on aspects of chronic absenteeism from the perspective of parents, understanding how they define good attendance is essential.

Most of the participants expressed surprise at the number of absences stated in their children’s high school attendance record. All but one parent indicated that the school had not kept them informed of their children’s attendance; only the parent of a student receiving special education services confirmed that her child’s IEP teacher was in constant contact regarding her child’s school attendance.

When asked how she characterized good attendance, Jamie stated that children who are ill should stay home; otherwise, they should be in school. Drew described good
attendance as follows: “Students who attend all classes the vast majority of the academic year, meaning only absent five or less days per semester.”

Tracy provided the following definition:

I would define “good” school attendance as a child showing up for more than 85% of scheduled class time, with the following exceptions: chronic illness or ongoing, regularly scheduled doctor visits, after which the child made up the work missed in class; and sudden loss to the family, whether losing a loved one or a parent’s job or their home.

Robin provided no specific definition of good attendance; however, she stated that if her child told her that he did not feel well, then she kept him at home. She said that when her son told her, “I don’t feel good,” she responded, “Okay, if you don’t feel good, then don’t go to school ‘cause . . . if I didn’t feel good, I didn’t go to school.” Overall, parents expressed their belief that children should be in school when they are not ill, but most felt that requiring a physician’s excuse placed a heavy and sometimes expensive burden on parents of students on attendance watch.

The number of absences recorded in any one year for the children of participants ranged from as few as three days to as many as 54 days of absences (see Table 3), including both excused and unexcused. Absences designated as excuses as well as those resulting from medical appointments, out of school suspension (OSS), illness, vacation, and court are all deemed by the school administration as excused. Absences designated as unexcused absences and those deemed truancy are included in the unexcused category.
The data in Table 3 do not include absences from individual class periods. Table 4 shows attendance by class period for the child of each participant. Until the 2013–14 school year the school schedule was based on nine class periods and a 15-minute homeroom period. When calculating full-day absences, a student had to be absent from school at least six periods in one day in order for the absence to equal a half-day absence; nine period absences equaled a full-day absence. Every two half-day absences also equaled a full-day absence. In Table 3, identifying part of a full-day absence and single-period absences is difficult.

Table 3

*Daily High School Attendance Record of Each Participant’s Child*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>child’s HS absence record</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Unex</th>
<th>Exc</th>
<th>Med</th>
<th>OSS</th>
<th>Ill</th>
<th>Vac</th>
<th>Court</th>
<th>Total days absent</th>
<th>Pct of days present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
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(NR=No record available)
A comparison of a student’s daily absences in Table 3 with the same student’s absences from individual class periods in Table 4 indicates that the student was absent from class many more periods than the daily absence data show. For example, information that Drew provided regarding her son skipping classes demonstrates that he missed much class time, much more than the daily attendance in Table 3 indicates.

Table 4

Attendance Record of Each Participant’s Child by Class Period

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(NR=No record available)

Theme 1: Bridges and Barriers to School Attendance

This section covers the core category bridges and barriers to school attendance with its five subcategories: connectedness, communication, caring–uncaring behaviors,
educational environments, and being school-wise (see Figure 2). They represent the parents’ experiences in the school environment.

**Connectedness**

Parent’s views of connectedness often referred to school engagement and student support. Codes that helped to describe parent’s experiences include phrases such as causing a lack of connection, child’s race kept them from receiving assistance, connecting child with support, and improving desire to stay connected to school. Parents provided examples of engagement and support as those things that improved the student’s desire to stay connected to the school and lessened student disenfranchisement. This included activities such as athletics, extracurricular activities, and tutor assistance, courses that lead to desired skills or career paths, access to credit recovery options, and supportive relationships with adults or mentors.

Codes that described their experiences include phrases such as the following: causing a lack of connection, child’s race kept him from receiving assistance, connecting children with support, and improving desire to stay connected to school. Positive examples of engagement and support-involved factors that fostered the student’s desire to stay connected to the school and reduced student absences.
Football, baseball, golf, and music and art clubs were examples of activities that participants used to describe how students made connections to school. Many times those connections were broken when students’ grades fell, when students moved from one school to another, or when they were eliminated from competitive teams. Vocational coursework was another area where parents felt students could make positive connections to school; however, when students were denied access to their desired program because of program fees or exclusion, the value of the school experience and their overall outlook on their future diminished. Chris stated that her son had expressed a desire to be a chef but instead was placed in automotive classes: “He had an interest in culinary, but I don’t think he was taking cooking. I know he was taking the automotive . . . They couldn’t get him into the cooking classes.” He became frustrated about exclusion from his desired program, skipped school, and then eventually quit altogether.

Although five of the six parents said that their children did not receive special education services during their high school years, they felt that special education services were a positive measure. They associated access to special education services with individualized attention, better communication, and supportive relationships. Parents whose requests for special education services for their children were denied for lack of

Figure 2. Core category: Bridges and barriers to school attendance.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Bridges and barriers to school attendance</th>
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<td>Connectedness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational Environment</td>
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qualification felt that equal access to supportive services were also denied. They held a belief that students who received these services benefited from individual attention, tailored instruction, and support and were thus successful in school. They believed that their children would have experienced more success in school with this extra attention.

When recalling her own school experience, Lynn stated, “I remember being in special classes when I was in elementary. I loved it.” She recalled the support she received in these classes that allowed her to be successful in school.

Chris said that her son needed the special attention she felt students received in special education classes: “He can’t get the help that he needs; he can’t get in with the special kids. . . . He’s just a fish in the sea with the other kids.” She described students who needed assistance but were in regular education classes as students who fell between the cracks: “By special needs, these kids I think that slip through the cracks are just as bad as the kids that are in the remedial classes,” referring to special education classes.

Chris felt strongly that the school failed to provide her and her son with options to help him in school. She said, “Maybe [they could have] brought us in as a team and said, ‘Hey look. We need this to happen,’ you know. ‘You need this game plan.’” Chris believed that two factors contributed to this problem: The school lacked (a) the resources to provide programming to students “in the middle” and (b) the capacity. She noted insufficient support staff, including counselors and administrators, for the number of students in the building.
Jamie’s son had an IEP, which she felt was a positive experience for both her and her son. She said:

I think it was his IEP teacher . . . . She used to keep in contact with us pretty well. She was always on track with him, and he was always talking with her about what he wanted to do in life when he graduated. . . . She was like working with me more.

For these parents, special education services provided an important connection to the learning environment and thereby access to the educational system.

In responding to the final question—“Would you like to share anything else regarding how the school treated you or your child?”—parents felt strongly that schools needed to do more to help. Chris stated, “I was just so frustrated because I couldn’t get help. You know what? There has to be some kind of a program or something or mentorship or something that these kids could do.”

Tracy also felt that schools needed to develop a program that could target students’ needs. She said: “Sometimes there’s programs that we have discretionary funds that we can target, you know, the particular needs.” Access to support programs, activities, and services was important to the participants of this study.

Each participant’s responses indicated that (a) additional programs, options, or services were unavailable for their children in order to improve their desire to connect to school and (b) a lack of such opportunities caused a disconnect to their school. Examples of responses included phrases like give him options, didn’t have nothing could hold his
interest, and correspondence course. These responses indicated a need for programs that engaged students or would be of interest to students. Responses such as individual attention, wished they would have done something, have tutors, put him in some kind of an in school suspension, and there has to be some kind of a program referred to programs that provide academic assistance to students. Responses such as get them tested, wished they’d do more testing for [learning styles], and I couldn’t get the assistance or help I needed referred to programs to identify individual needs of students. Responses like didn’t have any extracurricular activities, he didn’t make the team, didn’t make the cut, star players, and get more intramural sports referred to the competitive nature of high school athletics and parents’ perceived need for interscholastic athletic options.

**Communication**

Communication was another area that served as a bridge or barrier to a positive school experience. Participants described it in the following terms: efforts at communicating, needing better mechanisms for communicating, school’s failure to communicate with families, communicating for negative reasons, talking with school will help, and unsuccessful efforts to communicate. Efforts at communicating drew both positive and negative reactions from parents. Communication itself took the form of phone calls, emails, letters, conferences, conversations, and grade cards.

Codes associated with efforts at communicating were both positive and negative and duplicated actual statements of parents or were expressions of the way they felt; when successful, efforts by school personnel to communicate attendance concerns by phone,
email, or with letters were often seen by parents in a positive light. When Robin was asked who contacted her about her son’s absences, she stated that is was usually the “nice attendance lady.” When asked why she had positive feelings about the attendance aide, Robin said it had to do with the way she treated her son; her attitude seemed to say, “You’re not just a troublemaker. You have value.” The attendance aide showed a sense of caring, and the result was positive interaction during communication.

Tracy’s experience with the same attendance aide was negative. Tracy stated that once she realized that her daughter often skipped school, she asked the attendance aide whether she could call her to let her know when her daughter was absent; however, the attendance aide said, “No, I’m too busy.” This response by a school staff member to her request frustrated Tracy. She said:

I keep thinking. I keep going back to how can a parent make a decision or do something about their child’s attendance when they’re not notified. How will they know? Because you’ve got to work. . . I really wish they would’ve just let me know before it got out of hand because I had absolutely no idea.

Tracy also understood why the aide may have responded as she did: “She said, ‘We can’t do that.’ I mean I can kinda understand this. You know, they’re not our babysitters.” So instead, Tracy said that she called the school every day to find out if her daughter was present. Tracy revealed the basic struggle most parents noted in regard to the barriers created by unsuccessful efforts to communicate. Her statement clarified the central issue: “How can a parent make a decision or do something when they’re not
notified?” Instances when communication was lacking particularly showed that access to communication was important to parents.

Although all parents indicated that school personnel made efforts to communicate with them, all but one stated that their efforts to communicate were not always successful. Parents shared examples of teachers’ attempts to communicate with them. Those examples included emails, teacher websites, online grade book, IEP meetings, and letters from school. These can be effective ways to communicate when they are successful. One barrier to effective communication was the assumption that parents have access to electronic means of communicating. Chris stated:

There were teachers that had email stuff they could send in emails, but like I said, I didn’t have email access so I couldn’t. . . . I know this is the modern age and everyone’s supposed to have it.

Chris expressed a desire for school personnel to make evening home visits or hold weekend office hours so that working parents could meet with teachers. She said, “It seems to me they should have made a bigger effort to get a hold of me to come in for [a] meeting.” The school ran a program from which Chris’s child may have benefitted, but Chris said she was unaware of programs available to help students.

Parents suggested that communication could be improved by requiring parents’ signatures on report cards; setting up meetings with the child, parent, and others to discuss concerns and options; and making home visits. Tracy, who said that she
generally supported the school when it came to issues regarding her daughter’s discipline, stated:

I really wish they would’ve just let me know before it got out of hand because I had absolutely no idea until one day the school called and said, “[Your daughter] hasn’t been at school all semester,” and I went, ”Yes, she has.” . . .

That was like my “Really?” moment.

Lynn stated that the school never contacted her to discuss concerns about her son’s lack of progress or attendance issues. In the three years her son attended the school, she said that school personnel reached out to her twice, once to communicate a consequence and the second time to inform her that her son signed paperwork to withdraw from school. When asked what the school could have done differently, Lynn said,

I wish they would have helped him you know or even when he quit school somebody would have come over here and said, “Hey, . . . I’m from such and such. . . . You can start computer classes, you know, on the Internet and still get your GED.” . . . They didn’t offer that to me for him.

Lynn’s statement shows her desire for a home visit to intervene. Although she was not aware of it at the time, her district sponsored a drop-out recovery school that her son could have attended; however, she stated in her interview that when the principal called to inform her that her son had dropped out of school, he did not communicate that this school was an option.
When asked whether the teachers contacted her about attendance or academic concerns, Chris stated, “I don’t recall the teachers contacting me. I know a couple of the [drop-out recovery] teachers did. [But that was] just to get ahold of [my son].” Chris was not able to receive personal phone calls at work; however, she felt school personnel could have done more to communicate with her. She said:

> You know what might have helped in the evening? Home visits. It might have helped to have evening type visits. Even to meet the teacher, you have to do it during certain hours, and people that work can’t do that.

Chris, Drew, Robin and Tracy all felt that the school should have done more to communicate with parents.

Drew stated that she had no idea her child had missed so much school, “‘Cause I never got [a letter], was never notified of that many [absences]. So I was shocked.” Her response here was incongruent with later comments she made regarding her knowledge of her child’s absences. Statements such as “I would find out after the fact that he didn’t go” and “I would find out later that he wasn’t [in attendance]” seemed to confirm that someone at the school was communicating with Drew about her son’s absences; however, they also signal that the efforts by the school to communicate may have been unsuccessful.

When asked whether she could remember someone from the school contacting her about her son’s absences, Robin stated, “The attendance aide would call. I don’t think that either [the counselor] or [the assistant principal] did.” Robin recalled that her
son’s teacher never contacted her with concerns, but she emailed them; however, they seldom returned her emails. What frustrated Robin the most was that she received no grade cards or progress reports. She said:

That’s what was the annoying thing. I wasn’t getting a grade card sent to my house. I hardly ever saw his grade card ever. It didn’t have to be signed, didn't have to go back as far as I know. It should come to my house, I think, so I could be aware of what his progress was.

Robin said that when she complained to the school about receiving no progress reports, she was told she could go online to check the electronic gradebook; however, her son often refuted the information found there, stating the teacher had not updated the information. She felt that the electronic grade book was an ineffective way to communicate student progress with parents.

Many of the parents in this study accepted some personal or family responsibility for unsuccessful efforts at communicating; however, they shared some important insight on possible barriers to school–home communication. For instance, Tracy said, “I probably should’ve went to more of the open houses, . . . parent–teacher conferences, and that.” Chris acknowledged that her “kids erase the messages off the phone,” undermining efforts at communicating. Robin was frustrated that she no longer received letters or report cards from the school. She admitted that she and her child had moved about two years earlier without informing school personnel about the move: “But we did move. That should [have] been forwarded, I would think.” Unfortunately, it would appear that
without making the change of address, the post office stopped forwarding mail to the new address, which likely contributed to unsuccessful efforts to communicate.

**Caring–Uncaring Behavior**

Codes in the category designating caring and uncaring behavior were more likely to represent negative experiences for the participants in this study than positive ones. The category included codes that represented the following participant responses: a lack of caring, needed someone who cared, and someone who was caring. Negative codes were often associated with teachers, counselors and administrators. Participants’ descriptions included the following: they have pigeonholed him, teachers were picking on him, they weren’t there, never wanted to get us together, he didn’t care, there for a paycheck, and the teachers would be like I really can’t help you. The descriptions of teachers, counselors, and administrators were often but not always negative with regard to caring and uncaring behaviors.

The data also contained positive descriptions of educators. The parent of a student in the special education program described interactions with the intervention specialist in positive terms, such as the following: she was the one that really helped, I really appreciated her, she used to keep in contact with us pretty well, and she was always on track. Jamie also indicated that the words a teacher used gave her son an overall positive feeling about school: “When he got more of that affirmation, he tended to keep up with it better.” In Jamie’s view the teacher cared about her child.
Robin shared a positive description of her son’s counselor that summed up an important manifestation of caring: compassion.

He had a lot of compassion, I think, [the counselor] did, especially for what I was going through with [my son], but I do think he [the counselor] could’ve done more. Of course, I don’t know how many kids he had.

Robin’s comments show compassion for the counselor. In her description of him, she excuses the counselor for his lack of attention toward her child because a possible heavy workload.

As Drew reviewed the attendance record of her son, she observed that he attended the classes “he loved . . . or enjoyed” and often skipped classes if he did not enjoy the subject matter or did not get along with the teacher. Her observations were consistent with his attendance record, which showed he had fewer skipped periods (23) in classes in which he liked both the subject matter and the teacher. Her son’s attendance record revealed that the greatest number of skipped periods (54) occurred in classes in which he disliked the subject matter or the teacher. Drew described her interactions with one teacher who was concerned about her son: “She’s the one that contacted me that day to see if he was going to pass her class. If he wouldn’t have passed her class, he couldn’t’ve walked [graduated].” Pleased that this particular teacher kept in touch with her about her son’s progress, Drew described the actions of someone who cared about her son.
Educational Environment

Parents described the effect of the educational environment in both positive and negative terms. Every participant’s child had changed school districts at least once during K–12 years, and every participant acknowledged the negative effect of the change. All participants’ children attended at least one traditional public high school. One child attended a private school, and five children attended an online school. All participants whose children attended an online school described the experience in negative terms; in particular, the systems and processes in place to support the children in the educational environment determined the parents’ perception of the experience.

Parents expressed their difficulty verifying their children’s level of participation in their online schools. For example, Chris said that her child was “doing the bare minimum to not get kicked out” and that the “lack of monitoring” of her child’s progress led to an unsuccessful experience. Drew said that her child told her that the online schooling experience was “a bit harder [to keep up with] than [he] thought.” Jamie stated that her child was “not successful.” Robin said that online schooling “didn’t help [her son] learn . . . . He wasn’t really doing the work.”

Tracy said that her child was “unsuccessful” in the online school; however, the parents who had their children pursue a nontraditional education in the online school environment did so out of frustration with the traditional school that failed to meet their children’s educational, social, or emotional needs. Lack of access to face-to-face support on a daily basis led to parents’ disillusionment with online schools. The judge who
mandated Tracy’s daughter’s enrollment in an online school during a truancy court hearing asked the girl whether she was going to participate:

   He goes, ‘Well, . . . do you think you’re going to stick with it?’ And she goes, ‘Oh, of course, I will.’ And he goes, ‘Yeah, I’m sure you will.’ I’m sitting there going, ‘She’s not going to do it.’

According to Tracy her daughter failed to earn enough credits while enrolled in the online school to stay on track for graduation. However, after reenrolling in the traditional school, she was able to make up for the lost credit through an online credit recovery program at the traditional school, which required that students be present in the physical school environment to participate.

Lynn’s son did not attend an online school, but he had attended two private schools. She felt that the first private school her son attended was a positive experience for him: The teachers there cared for her son, and he received the individual attention she felt he needed. This curriculum was religion-based and included daily prayer, something that Lynn felt was lacking in public school options. When she and her children moved from the West Coast to Ohio, she initially enrolled her son in a private school, but the experience was not the same as it had been in the first private school he had attended. According to Lynn, at the first private school educators “loved” her son: “They would have him come out and help him read and have tutors, and the teacher would take the time ‘cause it was a smaller class.” Lynn stated that the school personnel were
well-equipped to address her son’s needs; however, his experience was not very positive in the second private school. When asked to describe the difference between the two, Lynn stated her son experienced difficulties making friends and was in conflict with the staff at the second school. Eventually, she placed him in the local public school, where she felt that the experience was negative; and as a result, her son “slipped through the cracks.” When her son turned 18 years old, he signed himself out of school without earning a diploma. The difference between the two schools stemmed from the culture of the systems: One was supportive of the individual needs of the student, and the other was not.

**Being School-Wise**

The term *school-wise*, a code that developed during the initial coding phase of the first interview, is associated with someone who feels a sense of belonging at school and experiences success in school. A sense of belonging is the result of navigating relationships with others in the school environment, behaving in socially acceptable ways, belonging to groups or participating in activities that make a student a part of the school community, and feeling a sense of school pride. Reading, writing, understanding and using mathematics, and a willingness or ability to study were some of the skills associated with school success. For the purposes of this study, students who understood and employed these types of skills have been designated as school-wise. The attributes noted above represent the positive end of the school-wise spectrum; however, the
descriptions provided by the parents in this study often represented the negative end of
the school-wise spectrum.

Experiences in this category were those of the children as relayed by the parent as
well as the parents’ experiences as both children and as adults. Analyzing the data in this
category revealed predominantly negative experiences. Participants stated that their own
school experiences sometimes resembled those of their children. In particular, the
category included the parents’ (a) experience as students in school, (b) perceptions of
their children’s experiences, and (c) previous experiences with school as parents.
Although one parent described positive experiences, the rest described negative ones.

Data in this category included the child’s school experience, efforts to enforce
school rules, the parent’s attitudes toward the school experience, the parent’s own school
experience, and similar experiences as a parent.

In the case of Lynn and her son, they both experienced the positive and negative
ends of the school-wise spectrum. According to Lynn many of her son’s absences during
his high school years occurred because “he didn’t get it.” Lynn’s clarified the meaning of
get it and its relevance to being school-wise. Lynn claimed that the school retained her
son in first grade, marking the point from which he experienced his initial struggles in
school. She also described a time when he experienced success in school, speaking
fondly about his experience in a private school prior to moving to Ohio. The school
offered a system of support accessible to her son. “They loved him,” she said. He
received tutoring assistance, pullout support, and was in smaller classes. According to
Lynn, “They tested him, . . . they would help him read, . . . he’d get excellent grades.” In fact, he did not want to leave this school. Lynn said that both she and her son felt that the people in this school cared: “The teachers loved him. He loved to go to school.” While in this educational environment, Lynn’s son was school-wise in a positive sense. Unfortunately, their family situation required a move to Ohio, where his new school had no comparable system of support.

After the move to Ohio, Lynn enrolled her son in another private school, but he was unsuccessful there: “Then we moved here, and everything went downhill.” According to Lynn, the new school did not provide the support that he had received at his previous school. Instead, she was told that her son could do the work if he wanted to. “It’s just he doesn’t want to. . . . He wasn’t trying,” the teachers told her. Lynn felt that up to this point, her son was trying, but eventually he lost hope and gave up. By the time he reached high school, Lynn’s son had lost the resilience necessary to overcome his school struggles. No longer school-wise and generally lacking in self-efficacy, he exhibited behaviors that led to negative school consequences. He dropped out of school during his junior year after turning 18 years old.

As Lynn shared her recollection about her child’s schooling experiences, she referred to her own experiences as a student in school, using the phrase slipped through the cracks, denoting a lack of support; her experiences serve as an example of a parent who was not school-wise. She said:
You know, I was one of them that slipped the cracks or whatever. I mean
I can spell, you know, enough, but not enough so, you know. . . I don’t know. . .
. No one don’t care. No one took the time to explain, you know, she’s got
dyslexia, you know, or something. No one did that.

She fondly remembered her special education classes during second and third grades.
During this time particular time in her life, she felt that her teachers helped her; however, her experiences in school turned negative once she reached high school. She said:

Then I got to high school. It was—it was terrible, you know. I didn’t know anything. I would sit by . . . a bunch of guys, and the guys would give me all the answers to everything. . . That’s why I started sending them to a private school. I didn’t want them to slip through the cracks like I did.

Describing her experiences with the school regarding her child’s education, Lynn stated that she felt her child had been abandoned by the school, using an expression that summed up the feelings of many of the parents—“traveling through a long tunnel.”

Lynn’s feelings of frustration resulted from the ease at which her son was able to sign out of school and her feelings that the school or society in general should have done more to prevent this. She was not school-wise and lacked the ability to navigate the system in order to help her son experience a more successful outcome.

According to Chris, her son also struggled in the school environment, where he was unable to achieve school success. He suffered from what she believed to be undiagnosed ADHD that often manifested in what she described as fidgeting behavior.
Prior to his freshman year of high school the family moved from the West Coast to Ohio. He was involved in sports prior to the move, but after the move “he was kind of like an outsider,” she said. He was unable to secure a position on the school-sponsored sports teams, further alienating him from the school community. “He didn’t have nothing that could hold his interest and stuff, so he started skipping school,” no longer willing to make the investment necessary to be successful.

Chris also referred to her son’s experience in school by using the phrase, slipped through the cracks. Chris’s son did not qualify for special education services. She stated, “I even tried [to get him help]. . . . But he tested higher than the kids in the remedial class.” Chris felt that the school discriminated against her son because he did not qualify for special education. Describing him as “in the middle,” she said, “He can’t get the help that he needs. He can’t get in with the special kids; he’s just a fish in the sea with the other kids.” She felt that the teachers, counselors, and administrators failed her son. “I think he slipped through the cracks. I don’t think they did enough with him.” This left her with a negative perception of his experience.

By the end of his freshman year in high school, Chris’s son was in trouble, leading to in- and out-of-school suspensions. He believed his teachers picked on him. Chris did not believe that the teachers were out to get him, but she also felt that they could have done more to help him: “I think the teachers were kind of overwhelmed, and plus he was moving on to the next grade and somebody else’s problem.” Eventually, Chris’s son enrolled in an online school, but he continued to struggle and was unable to
achieve academic success. “Just like his school work, he would do a test and could do the test; but he wouldn’t do the assignments to turn in for his grades.” Chris’s son dropped out of secondary school, enrolled in a GED credentialing program, passed the test, and received his GED certificate.

Jamie’s experience with her son’s school was a positive one. Her son’s IEP gave her and her son a tool they could use to access the benefits of the school environment. Although she may have lacked the skills to navigate the system, with the help of the legal requirements of the IEP and the assistance of the intervention specialist, she and her son were more school-wise than others in their attempts to do so. She said she not only felt that school personnel did everything they could to help her son but also supported and informed by the special education teacher who worked with her son: “I think the school did what they could do. . . . I don’t think that there was anything the school could have done different or anything. I think they did fairly well.” When Tracy compared her own experiences in school with those of her son, she compared their behavior. She said her husband had not graduated from school, and she used his example to impress upon her son the importance of earning a high school diploma.

**Theme 2: Circumstances That Can Be Toxic Detrimental to the Development of Bridges**

In this section the two categories that constitute Theme 2: Circumstances that can be toxic to the development of bridges are elaborated. This theme contains two categories: family stressors and influences upon the child according to parent (see Figure
3). Family stressors, including family dynamics, legal troubles, and influences upon the child according to parent, were coded as follows: it was him or her, when things changed, and influence of others. The subcategories represent the influences of family dynamics and social environments primarily outside the school environment yet negatively affect a parent’s ability to navigate the home–school environment successfully.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3.** Theme 2: Circumstances toxic to the development of bridges.

**Family Stressors**

Subcategories that constitute the family stressors category include family dynamics and legal troubles. Family stressors were most often described in negative terms, such as feelings of despair, feelings of frustration (sometimes towards others, but often towards their child), feelings of loss, feelings of being overwhelmed, feelings of a lack of support, feelings of not knowing. Participants described parental hopes and concerns in the following terms: hoping for a positive outcome, lacking success as an adult, and similar experiences as a child. Parents described legal troubles in negative terms, such as the following: causing or resulting in legal trouble and lacking support once involved in legal trouble.

All parents in the study experienced the school environment in terms of interaction with their children about school issues, their interaction with personnel at their
children’s school, and their own schooling experiences. Often, parents’ negative experiences with their children’s school were exacerbated by family stressors at home, the legal troubles of their children, or feelings of losing hope over their own situation. These examples help to provide some insight on stressors experienced by families that negatively affected their ability to navigate the home–school environment.

**Family dynamics.** Parents described the effect of family dynamics in almost exclusively negative terms. Specifically, they described the impact of the child’s behavior on the family, the loss of a family member because of incarceration or death, difficulties in the household because of the child’s behavior issues, and other issues that affected the family. Descriptions of social and economic difficulties, family relocation, trouble because of family stressors, feeling overwhelmed, and the impact of the parent’s work schedule on family obligations emerged from the data.

All parent participants talked about the struggles they had with their children over attendance issues, but parent interviews indicated that the source of family friction was often a manifestation of other problems. Some of the difficulties experienced by families involved the children’s behavior at home, in the community, and at school. For example, Robin said that the effect of her child stealing from the family put a strain on their relationship: “I did go to school often because if something was missing from home, I didn’t let that stop me from going in. . . . He had this thing about money. [He] would steal stuff and sell it.” Robin felt that peer pressure was the cause of her child’s theft of items from home. She said, “I think it was not so much pressure from other kids to steal
but pressure from other kids to have things. Peer pressure to have things. ‘Why don’t I have a Guitar Hero?’ or, you know, things like that.” She believed her son did this to sell these items so that he had the money to buy things he thought other teenagers had.

Robin also wondered whether some of her son’s behavioral issues were related to a lack of a male role model: “I think I being a single mom is a disadvantage because—and maybe that's why he was acting out—because there wasn’t a father at home.” However, she stated that her son and her daughter, who was 12 years older than her brother, shared a close relationship. Robin felt that some of her son’s behavioral issues were influenced by her daughter’s absence from the home.

In addition to skipping school, Tracy indicated that her daughter left the house to be with her friends and sneaked out of the house to engage in shoplifting. On at least one occasion Tracy’s daughter sneaked out and traveled more than 30 miles to attend a party. On another occasion, she left school to travel more than 45 miles to attend another party. Tracy believed that her daughter engaged in such behavior as a result of boredom and in an effort to fill unsupervised time with something she thought was more exciting. According to Tracy, her daughter engaged in shoplifting on at least two occasions. During the interview, Tracy struggled to understand her daughter’s behavior:

Don’t get the wrong impression! She never really did anything bad. She never hurt anybody. She’s never—except for shoplifting at Walmart—stolen anything. Um, to meet her and talk to her, she is so sweet, and she’s so funny, and she’s so
bright. You know, she can converse on almost any subject. You wouldn’t even think she was troubled.

Unable to explain the reasons for her daughter’s behavior, Tracy later referred to her daughter as a sociopath:

And you can talk to her, and she’ll smile, and she’ll nod and say okay.

And then she’ll go off and do what she wants anyways. It’s not that she doesn’t hear you. It’s not that she doesn’t understand you. It’s [that] she doesn’t care.

That’s all I can think of: She doesn’t care. She doesn’t care what you say. She doesn’t care what anybody say. She’s just going to do what she wants.

The struggles that ensued between Tracy and her daughter eventually resulted in a strain on their relationship; however, Tracy emphasized that she still loved her daughter and was very proud that she graduated from school and was working.

Parent participants often described the ways their jobs limited their ability to communicate with their children’s school. Doing so seemed especially difficult for single parents like Chris, who felt that the effects of being a single parent in a working-class family made raising a child and connecting with school difficult. She felt that her son’s behavior deteriorated towards the end of his ninth-grade year. She had trouble with him at home and at school. As a working mother, she expressed the difficulty she had keeping up with what was happening with him at school. Because she was unable to take personal phone calls at work, the difficulty she experienced with the home–school
communication increased. She said, “I didn’t know what to do. . . . I’m a working mom.”

The friction in Lynn’s house was severe. Prior to her son’s 18th birthday, he skipped school and refused to accept consequences from the school administrator. She said, “And he just started being bad and, you know. It got worse, and we would bump heads so much, so much he just thought he was grown.” Lynn said that once her son turned 18 years old, he withdrew from school. As a result she was frustrated and disappointed to learn that the law and the school permitted him to do so without her knowledge. Her relationship with her son deteriorated after he left school. She said, “He was just at my wit’s end. You know, just doing bad things around here.” Eventually, Lynn expelled her son from their home. Unfortunately, he did not graduate from high school, nor did he earn his GED.

Drew, a single working mother, described the way her son manipulated her in order to persuade her to write excuses for absences to avoid school discipline. She said:

There were a few times that I left the house [and he would ask me], “Is there any way you [could write me a note]. I have to have that note today.” So, I’m on my back about it, and I would just say, “I don’t know.” [He would say,] “I just need to get one.” I was so frazzled by that point.

At times she left for work in the morning, believing that he had left for school. He rose in the morning, dressed, and left for school; however, once she left for work, he returned home and skipped school for the day. She said that he sometimes did not go to school
but asked her to write absence notes; she was concerned that refusing to write the note would negatively affect her relationship with her son. She stated:

We’ve always been extremely close, and there were some instances that I felt like I don’t want to push him away because he’s letting me into what he is doing. . . . He’ll say, “Mom, I have this going on. Will you support me in this?” I felt like I was at a crossroads.

Eventually, she felt worn down and wrote the notes that her son requested.

**Legal troubles.** Codes associated with parents’ experiences with the legal system regarding their children’s behavior included the following: circumstances resulting in legal trouble, issues resulting from legal trouble, and lacking support once involved. Of the three parents whose children were involved in the juvenile justice system, two expressed frustration that judges did not impose meaningful consequences upon their children, in effect denying them the programs, interventions and resources they believed other families were given to improve the lives of their children.

Tracy shared the experiences she and her daughter had with the court system during her daughter’s freshman or sophomore year, when she was arrested for curfew violation. She was required to appear in court, but the court issued no consequences. Then during her junior year she and some friends went to a local discount retailer during the school day and stole items. Tracy said:

I think there were three—filled a bunch of shopping carts at Walmart full of just random stuff and pushed it outside and got busted for shoplifting. And she’s like,
“We weren’t trying to steal toasters, you know.” Well, [she] took it outside. It’s shoplifting.

She expressed frustration with the way her daughter minimized the offense; however, she was even more frustrated with the court system. Although Tracy’s daughter appeared in court for violating the law, Tracy felt that the court system failed to provide meaningful consequences that would deter her daughter’s behavior. She said,

They didn’t do anything to her. Gave her a fine, and [I] noticed that pretty little girls don’t get in a lot of trouble around here. If she had been overweight [or] Goth, she would’ve gotten a lot more trouble.

Tracy remembered that they had to appear in court several months later. Although her daughter continued to skip school, the judge did not address her absenteeism. Instead, her daughter was sentenced to community service for the shoplifting offense. Ironically, her daughter participated in the community service but continued to skip school.

Chris felt strongly that her son’s race, which was Caucasian, and middle-class income kept her from being able to receive support to help improve the life of her son, the same resources, opportunities, and assistance she felt that Black and Hispanic students received. She described this as a form of reverse racism. Chris believed her son was purposely trying to break the law so that he could work on his GED certificate while in juvenile detention. She stated:

He had several friends that got their GED schooling and stuff in [juvenile detention] because they were there, and I kept telling him, “What? Are you trying
to get in trouble to be like your friends?” I felt that we were discriminated against. I couldn’t get the assistance or help I needed because we were White, middle-class people.

Chris felt that school consequences, which she said often resulted in out-of-school suspension, were ineffective and gave her son what he ultimately wanted: to stay home. What bothered her more, however, was a lack of effective consequences from the court when he fell into legal trouble. She said, “Put the kid . . . in JVC and school him . . . where they are in a controlled [environment], . . . where they can force him to do something. But they never kept him long enough.” Chris felt that the courts denied her assistance and resources because of her child’s race and class standing in society. She felt strongly that courts were unwilling to detain White, middle-class youth.

During his high school years, Drew’s son spent time in juvenile detention. As a condition for release, he was required to attend an online school. “He did go to the [online] academy for a while, and that was compulsory because of his little antics with juvie, so he did have to go to that. He had to attend; he had to do the work.” She felt that her son did not academically benefit from the online school. With some intervention through the court system, he earned his diploma. She believed that without this condition for release from detention, her son might not otherwise have graduated.

**Influences Upon the Child According to Parent**

Codes in the category designated as influences upon the child according to the parent derived from the parents’ perspective and dealt with factors that influenced the
path, attendance choices, or outcomes of the participant’s child. Three subcategories constitute this category. Codes in the subcategory it was him or her came from an in vivo code used to describe the child’s behavior, the impact of a condition on the child’s behavior or outcomes, and the impact of genetics on the child’s behavior or outcome. Codes in the subcategory things changed describe the beginning of the change, events that caused the change, and results of the change. Codes in the subcategory influence of others involved the impact of the following factors on the child’s school outcomes or attendance: (a) lack of relationships, (b) negative influences, (c) interference in the life outcome resulting from a relationship, and (d) positive influences of a relationship on the child.

**It was him or her.** Although parents attributed their children’s attendance issues to others at times, all of them attributed at least part of the problem to behaviors or choices made by their children. Their descriptions included the following: influence of child’s behavior, impact of condition, influence of others, other influences, and refusal to attend. The subcategory it was him or her came from an in vivo code that emerged with Lynn tried to explain what caused her son to change.

In another state Lynn’s son had attended a private school, where he was successful. Lynn said, “He’d get excellent grades. The teachers loved him. He loved to go to school.” When she had to move her family to Ohio, she enrolled him in another private school, but he did not experience the same success there. The school eventually expelled him because of what Lynn described as the influence of his bad behavior: “It
was just him, I think.” Lynn said that a possible trigger for his acting out may have been the change in his environment: “He didn’t want to move. . . . He loved that school ‘cause they were just so helpful.” Lynn believed that her son probably exhibited similar behaviors at his previous school, but she felt that personnel at the new school may have addressed the problematic behaviors differently. Having established relationships at his previous school may also have made a difference.

Robin stated that her son was “a bright boy . . . just lazy.” He missed 32 days of school during his senior year, when he was placed in detention by the court for 20 days for a minor drug offense. The attendance record also indicated that he received seven days of out-of-school suspension. Robin attributed much of her son’s attendance issues to the influence of his marijuana use on his motivation: “I think it takes away the motivation of a lot of people.” In the morning when it was time to get ready for school, Robin’s son complained that he did not feel well and did not want to go to school. When asked what made her son feel unwell, Robin responded, “In general about life and that he just . . . was having a crappy day or that he was just being lazy. So I did not force him to go.” Robin stated that when her son was of middle school age, she home-schooled him. This was one way she could address his requests to be absent from school. She felt that as a home-schooling parent, she could still make him do his daily lessons even if he said that he did not feel well. At least he was home with her, where she could see that he completed his work.
Tracy labeled her daughter a sociopath. She shared an incident that required her to meet with an assistant principal because her daughter had forged attendance notes. When she asked her daughter whether she had done so, the girl responded that she did but that it was no big deal. Her reaction surprised both Tracy and the assistant principal. She described her daughter as detached from the reality of the situation:

She is concerned about herself, not to the point where she doesn’t believe that others actually exist in her world, but it’s to the point where I’m going to do what I want, and I don’t care what you think. That’s all there is to it.

Tracy acknowledged that she and her daughter were similar: “I was—I was like that, and I still am to a degree. I can it control better ‘cause I can recognize it, but I think that’s part of her problem, too.” Tracy believed that she and her daughter inherited this trait from her father. She said:

It would be something interesting to study. If you could actually research the genes, the DNA, or the brain waves even, you know. What exactly do you pass on your kids? ‘Cause I know my dad passed it on to me, and then [my daughter] got a little bit of it, and I really hope her kid gets it twice as bad.

Tracy saw a lot of herself in her daughter and her behaviors. She believed that her daughter’s behavior was the result of heredity.

Drew believed that her son was currently “in no man’s land.” Admitting that she was aware that he skipped school, she said, “He . . . was having a crappy day or that he was just being lazy. So I did not force him to go.” Drew stated that her son used
marijuana, which she believed negatively influenced his motivation. She also said that her son struggled in school, was a poor reader, and often did not turn in his work. She wondered whether this might have negatively affected his desire to attend school.

Drew believed that both she and her son were responsible for his poor attendance. “I blame myself because I didn’t hold the line. I gave in . . . but then I realized at one point that it was out of my control,” she said. Drew stated that her work schedule and that of her husband made ensuring that her son attended school difficult:

I have a big job that I am in charge of, and I have to get to work, and I had to almost put it out of my mind, and I just prayed that he would do the right thing.

Drew’s son blamed his teachers for the difficulties he experienced in school; however, Drew disagreed on this point:

I don’t blame any of them because . . . a lot of it was his own fault because he doesn’t turn things [in], you know. It’s not their fault. . . . I held him accountable for what he did. . . . We had more arguments, disagreements than we ever had his whole life over school. I just wanted [him] to do well. If he applied himself, he could do well.

Her son’s decisions were also influenced by his love of music and relationships with a girl and an older acquaintance who had connections with the music industry.

_When things changed._ Several influences served as catalysts for change in the children of the participants in this study: transitioning from one grade level to another, moving from a different state, changing schools, suffering disappointment, and using
drugs. Descriptions in this subcategory include the following phrases: catalyst for the change, causing things to change, and resulting from when things changed.

Most parents were able to pinpoint some event or time period that brought change in their children; they used wording including the following: after the move he became an outsider, freedom to make his own decisions, his junior year he began to slack off, it probably started in ninth grade, junior high school was the turning point. These were all time-periods in which parents observed changes within their children’s behavior, attitudes and interests that signaled the beginning of when this negative transformation in their child.

Robin said that she saw a change in her son after his transition to middle school. During his middle school years she met with teachers, concerned with her son’s lack of progress and whom he had chosen as his friends. Robin believed her son changed during this time in his life. She said, “I think for the most part he wasn’t getting his work done and that . . . there was a possibility that he would be getting in trouble.” Robin tried to help her son with his work at home as she had previously done; however, he refused her assistance. She said, “When he went to middle school, it was, ‘You’re not my teacher.’ There was an attitude shift. ‘You’re not my teacher. You don't know what they’re doing.’” Instances such as this caused alienation between Robin and her son, eventually resulting in Robin excluded from her son’s life altogether.

For Chris’s son, the turning point occurred at the end of ninth grade, when the family moved to Ohio from the West Coast. She recalled the following:
It seemed like the end of his freshman year is when he started having problems. I think it was because . . . we moved here in 2006, . . . and he was always involved in sports and activities and everything. Then when he moved here, . . . he was kind of like an outsider and everything. . . . The sports teams were local kids. Ninth grade he was on the football team, and he didn’t really make the cut on the football team ‘cause the other kids were kids that had lived here and grown up and were stars and stuff on the football team. It kind of disappointed him, so when he didn’t have any extracurricular activities, he lost interest in school.

Not only did he change schools, but the family also moved from one state to another. This transition caused Chris’s son further disappointment when he was unable to make it onto the team. His struggled to find a way to fit in at his new school, but he had few opportunities to connect to this school, leaving him with a feeling of alienation.

Lynn felt that the turning point for her son occurred sometime between the move to Ohio and after enrolling him in a public high school. Her children had experience in a private school prior to the move, so Lynn felt enrolling them in a private school after moving to Ohio would be a positive experience for them; however, her son struggled at the new school. School personnel felt that he was not trying. Eventually, she enrolled him at a public high school, where he continued to struggle. While analyzing what happened, Lynn said, “Either he gave up—he wasn’t trying anymore—or . . . he was having difficulty. It was probably hard for him. The more he wasn’t being successful,
then he probably, after a while, he just wasn’t trying.” Determining the exact cause of
the decline was difficult: the loss of connections, the transition to a new state, the
transition to two different schools, or other events that resulted from these circumstances.
The eventual result was that Lynn’s son decided to withdraw from school without earning
a diploma.

**Influence of others.** According to parents, at times during their children’s lives,
the influence of others negatively affected the choices they made. Descriptions in this
subcategory included phrases like disenfranchisement because of a lack of relationships,
disenfranchisement resulting from negative relationship, and influence of a relationship.

The transition to high school was difficult for Jamie’s son; however, his
attendance did not become a problem until his sophomore year, when he accumulated
two unexcused and 12 excused absences. Jamie stated that many of her son’s absences
resulted from illness and that she usually had no problem getting him to school. In fact,
she drove him to school most days. The problems usually developed once he arrived at
school. Jamie explained:

> It seemed like he just didn’t want to go or something. But he also started
hanging out with some kids that . . . contributed to a lot of his [issues]. I would
take him to school and drop him off at school, and he would cut out and hang out
with people.

Although the transition to high school was not a smooth one for her son, Jamie believed
the influence of friends caused him to skip school. “He would meet up on the corner with
some of his buddies and supposedly go back to school. [They would] then ditch out around lunch time and be gone for the other half of the day.” Jamie believed that the strongest influence on her son’s absences from individual class periods was his desire to spend time with friends off campus.

The attendance record for Jamie’s son indicated that he frequently missed individual class periods. Jamie believed that his attendance improved during his senior year; however, his attendance record for that year indicated a total of 22 missed days of school consisting of 14 days of excused absences, one for medical reasons, one out-of-school suspension, and six days of unexcused absences. Jamie believed her son sometimes became upset in class and chose to leave the school for several periods. Her son’s associations had a negative effect on his willingness to attend school. Jamie said that as a family they had to “crack down because he was still hanging out with some people that he shouldn’t.” Ultimately, her son was able to earn the credits necessary to graduate from high school.

After efforts to join the high school soccer and basketball teams failed, Drew’s son, like many teenagers, searched to fulfill those interests outside the school environment. What kept him connected to school was a female student, whom he dated. She was one year younger than he was. If she went to school, he went to school; however, the opposite was also true. Drew explained:
They had a relationship that if she didn’t go to school, she didn’t want him to go to school. . . . I know, that’s not right, . . . but he succumbed to that. . . . I think his personal life overshadowed his academic life.

According to Drew, her son also became involved with negative influences from the local music industry. She said, “Along with that industry, comes, you know—I don’t mean to stereotype, but when you have older people . . . that are hanging out with them—it has an effect.” Eventually, those older individuals moved away, and Drew’s son was able to strike a balance between his music and school in order to earn his high school diploma.

According to Drew, her son was fortunate because in spite of some negative influences in his life, he also had a least one teacher who worked with him to ensure that he passed her class so that he could graduate. Drew said, “I had met her in person and then she kept in touch with me.” This teacher warned Drew that not only was her son struggling in her class but in other classes as well. Drew emailed her son’s teachers periodically to make sure that he had made the progress he needed to graduate. She continued: “[The teacher] was the one that contacted me that day to see if he was going to pass her class. If he wouldn’t have passed her class, he couldn’t walk [graduate].” Drew believed that without this teacher’s extra efforts, her son would have had to attend summer school in order to graduate. With his music career taking off, she knew he would have simply quit school. The influence of others can have a negative or positive impact on the life choices of a child.
Robin indicated that her son’s middle school teachers tried to warn her that he was associating with students who might negatively influence him; however, she expressed frustration that the teachers would not divulge the names of those students. She stated, “We had a parent–teacher conference, and several of the teachers got together. They said he’s hanging out with the wrong crowd. They couldn’t tell me who he was hanging out with. That’s ridiculous.” His teachers expressed their concern that the negative influence of others was affecting her son’s ability to get his work done as well as his behavior in school; however, because of privacy concerns, they would not share the names of the students with Robin. She tried to get her son to tell her who these students were, but he refused to share that with her.

In general, all of the parents in this study believed that others negatively influenced their children and that the influence of these individuals contributed to their chronic absenteeism. The descriptions of codes in this category indicated that the children of the participants in this study lost their connection to school, became disenfranchised, and sought to make connections elsewhere. These connections were overwhelmingly negative and predominantly led to school failure, legal trouble, and subsequent alienation from school.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the emergent theory and elaborated the two themes that developed from this study: bridges and barriers to school attendance and elements detrimental to the development of bridges. The experiences of each parent and child in
the school environment contributed to the development of bridges and barriers that influenced how they experienced the school environment. When the interactions were perceived as positive, they added a positive element that enriched the experience. Conversely, when the interactions were perceived as negative, they added a negative element that interfered with their ability to benefit from the experience. Certain outside forces also existed, such as family stressors and the influences on the child that interfered with the ability of the parent and child to experience the school environment in a positive way.

Ultimately, all of the participants described their hope for a positive outcome for their children. As Lynn put it, “All parents want their kids to have better.” Those hopes included improving their relationships with their children and hopes for continued education and future success. Unfortunately, many of the children from this study continue to struggle to experience success as adults. The next chapter contains findings and implications for school personnel.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The leadership of school personnel is vital in addressing circumstances that lead to parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. In an effort to find solutions for chronic absenteeism, frustration and disappointment can be mistaken for attempts to assign blame. Parents do not care who is to blame; instead they look for ways to help their children succeed. In the experiences of the participants in this study and demonstrated in the literature (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lareau & Shumar, 1996), too often the home–school relationship is adversarial and leads to few solutions in addressing chronic absenteeism. By engaging parents, students, and community resources, school personnel can use distributive leadership practices that allow all voices to be heard (Spillane & Camburn, 2006). The moral responsibility of the school leader is to ensure that barriers standing in the way of parents’ and students’ access to a productive and enriching school environment are identified and dismantled by transforming “the organization through people and teams” (Fullan, 2001, p. 17). In order to do so, school leaders must act with moral purpose in order to make a difference in the lives of their students (Fullan, 2001).

The Development of Parents’ Perceptions of the School Environment

In this study parents interacted with school personnel for a variety of reasons: to meet with guidance counselors to set up their child’s schedule, to gain information about required forms from the school secretary, and to report an absence to an attendance aide.
by phone. In general interactions were neutral, positive, or negative. For example, interactions that parents considered routine often left them with a neutral feeling about the situation, such as receiving an emergency medical form in the mail or completing the form and mailing it back to the school. Calling in a child’s absences and speaking with an attendance aide who expressed care and concern about a child’s illness engendered positive feelings. Conversely, receiving a call from the school indicating that a child had received a detention for misbehavior caused negative feelings about the situation. The data from this study indicate participants’ perceptions about the school or school personnel were based on no single event or interaction but instead on a series of interactions as well as the experiences that parents had had in their own earlier years. The findings from this study support the work of previous researchers (Graham-Clay, 2005; Räty, 2007; Scott-Jones, 1995).

As demonstrated in the analytical framework (see Figure 1 in Chapter 4), experiences that created bridges or barriers between the home and school were fundamental to establishing parents’ perceptions of the school environment when dealing with their children’s chronic absenteeism. Experiences that created bridges in this study were positive interactions associated with the following: creation of connections for the child, positive communication, caring relationships, supportive educational environment, and a sense in parents that their children possessed or could attain the intellectual skills necessary to benefit and thrive in the educational environment. The attainment of intellectual skills was associated with being school-wise, a trait developed from previous
experiences in school; if the experiences were negative, barriers stood in the way of parents developing positive perceptions of the school environment.

Negative and positive interactions fused to form the lens through which parents viewed the school environment. If parents experienced a situation or interaction in a negative way but had a history of positive experiences, they viewed the overall school environment as positive or neutral; however, if they experienced primarily negative interactions in the school environment, they tended to associate those experiences with a negative impression of the school. In the latter situation, parents struggled to support school policies designed to limit school absences.

Other circumstances existed in the family dynamic of each participant that affected the parent’s and child’s ability to access the school environment in a positive manner. These circumstances were associated with stresses on the family and influences on the child. Family stressors derived from family dynamics (barriers caused by workplace restrictions; fractured parent–child relationships; pressures resulting from life circumstances, finances, and loss of a loved one) and legal troubles (court appointments, lack of support from the court, and lack of resources). Influences upon the child according to the parent were represented by the following codes: it was him or her (defiant behavior, behavior associated with diagnosed or undiagnosed conditions, child’s choices), when things changed (childhood trauma, transitions, drug use, inability to cope with disappointment), and the influence of others (peer pressure and negative peer influences). Ultimately, parents’ perceptions of the school environment were based on
interwoven experiences both negative and positive in nature. The way they viewed the school environment depended on the extent to which they could mitigate the negative experiences so that the general outcome for their child was a positive one.

The goal of this study was to understand how parents experienced the school environment in an effort to gain insight on how to address parent-condoned chronic absenteeism. The following questions helped guide this study.

What influence do parent–child negotiations play when a child attempts to miss school with parent permission? (Elliott, 1999; Reid, 1999, 2006b)

Do barriers in the family–school relationship interfere with a parent’s ability to follow school attendance policies with their children? (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996)

Are parents’ perceptions derived from previous interactions with school personnel? (Chang & Romero, 2008; Corville-Smith, 1995; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Graham-Clay, 2005; Knesting, 2006; Miller & Miller, 1996; Räty, 2007; Reid, 1999; Scott-Jones, 1995; Sheppard, 2005)

When I began this study, I discovered that two of the subquestions were close-ended and failed to allow for the exploration of the participants’ experiences. Because constructivist grounded theory is theory in which the researcher is meant to “take a reflexive stance” and attend to “the studied phenomenon rather than the method of study” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 206), forcing the use of such close-ended research questions would have been inappropriate. Thus, during the interviews participants were encouraged to
discuss barriers that stood in the way of their ability to follow school attendance policies as well as prior experiences with school personnel as those recollections emerged.

**The Influence of Parent–Child Negotiations**

Parent–child negotiations played a role in the child’s attempts to miss school with parent permission. All but one parent suspected they had at times allowed their children to stay home when they were not ill, giving them the benefit of the doubt. For example, Robin stated that she allowed her son to stay home when he did not feel like going to school because she had done the same when she was in school. Her behavior was consistent with current research on parents’ experiences with attendance and truancy (Reid, 2006b).

Drew felt that her son manipulated her to write excuses for absences, believing that failing to do so would negatively affect her relationship with her son. Both Reid (1999, 2002) and Sheppard (2005) reported similar findings in their research. One parent stated that her son stayed home only when he was ill but acknowledged that he had left school after the school day had begun on numerous occasions. The period absence data (see Table 4) indicates that the children of all participants skipped one or more classes at some point during the day. Parents’ reasons for excusing absences when they knew their children were not ill varied: belief system (e.g., “I did the same when I was a kid”), desire to avoid family conflict, and uncertainty regarding legitimacy of absence. The data and research suggest (Reid, 2002; Sheppard, 2005) that parent–child negotiations contributed
to family conflict and mother–adolescent disagreement and that together these along with school disaffection contributed to chronic absenteeism.

For example, Robin’s son suffered personal loss when his father died and then lost his connection to school when he did not make the cut to play sports in high school. Robin’s son experienced several school transitions, including a period of incarceration for drug use, all of which negatively influenced his ability to establish positive connections throughout his primary and secondary school experience. Drew’s son also struggled to find his niche in high school. As with Robin’s son, he was cut from participation in interscholastic sports because these activities became more competitive during his high school years. He was, however, able to make connections outside the high school, but they were often the cause of unexcused absences for Drew’s son. Tracy’s daughter found little value in a secondary education and was unable to make appropriate social connections in the school environment. The teenagers with whom she preferred to associate sought thrills that were not a part of the normal school experience, often resulting in some type of legal consequences. According to the information provided by parents, all of these students felt alienated and consequently found making meaningful connections in the school environment difficult. According to Cothran and Ennis (2000), developing meaningful connections between the school environment and students is essential to student engagement.

Alienation may be a manifestation of students’ difficult finding their niches. Another source of their estrangement might be the result of transience and a lack of roots.
Parents in this study stated that their children attended more than one high school, indicating that transience and lack of connectedness may be a contributing influence to their inability to make connections in the school environment. Their inability to make connections in the school environment may have derived from their transience, an assertion supported in research. For example, many of the participants’ children attended online schools at some point during their high school years, while still living in the attendance area of the high school. Some students may have chosen this option because they failed to make connections in the brick-and-mortar school. These findings are consistent with those in the research (Garbarino, 1998b; Reid, 2010; Vera & Shin, 2006).

**Barriers That Interfered with Support of School Attendance Policies**

With regard to barriers that interfered with a parent’s ability to support school attendance policies, the participants confirmed that such barriers interfered with their children’s access to meaningful school experiences. These findings were consistent with those found in current research (Eastman et al., 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Reid, 2010). Evidently, these barriers contributed to their children’s unwillingness to attend school regularly. Garbarino (1998b) found—and evidence here suggests—that school personnel could have done more to improve student attendance by supporting parents and the students’ needs. Evidence indicates that the lack of support services contributed to parents’ inability to follow school attendance policies with their children. It also suggests that in many instances school personnel failed to collaborate in meaningful ways with parents and children in an effort to support those policies. According to Bridgeland,
Dilulio, Streeter, and Mason (2008), parents want prompt notification when their children are absent or skip school, yet communication continues to be a significant barrier. They found a direct relationship between the level of school involvement by parents and the level of communication by school personnel.

**Influence of Prior Experience in the Development of Parents’ Perceptions**

In addressing the third question—Are parents’ perceptions derived from previous interactions with school personnel?—I found evidence in research (Chang & Romero, 2008; Corville-Smith, 1995; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Graham-Clay, 2005; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Räty, 2007; Reid, 1999; Scott-Jones, 1995; Sheppard, 2005) as well as in this study confirming that parents base perceptions of the school environment on previous experiences related to school: their own childhood memories of school, their children’s previous encounters at school, and their interactions with personnel at their children’s schools. These perceptions derived from circumstances related to school experiences taking place both inside and outside the school as well as other experiences related to the school environment: access to programs, effectiveness of communication, caring–uncaring behaviors of school personnel, educational environments, and being school-wise. Examples were found in participants’ recollections of their experiences in school, in which parents often made connections between their children’s experiences and their own. Lynn serves as an example of a parent who based her perception of the school environment on her experiences.
Lynn shared her struggles in school, recalling classmates who gave her homework or test answers because she was unable to spell. She said, “You know, I was one of them that slipped through the cracks. . . . No one don’t care. No one took the time to explain, you know, ‘She’s got dyslexia,’ you know, or something. No one did that.” She shared memories that left her feeling that her school failed to provide her the support she needed to be successful.

Next, Lynn shared memories of her son’s school experience. He had struggled in school since age six. Her earliest recollection of her son’s school experience centered on negative feedback: her son’s retention in first grade. He continued to struggle throughout the rest of his school years until he eventually gave up altogether. She remembered the phone call from the principal informing her that he had withdrawn from school. She begged the principal to prevent him from doing so, but his response, as she remembered it, was, “Well, he can take himself out of school if he wants to.” As she reflected on her interactions with this principal, she stated, “He was just doing his job, you know. He didn’t care. Why should he? I guess it is not his child.” Lynn did not want her son to slip through the cracks, but she believed this is exactly what happened.

Lynn’s perceptions of the school environment were consistent with her prior knowledge of and interactions with school personnel, leaving her with the belief that “they don’t care,” an inference she drew from the failure of school personnel to keep her son from slipping through the cracks as she had. For parents and children, these devaluing experiences “can be highly damaging to the development of a positive sense of
self” (Vera & Shin, 2006). They also serve to reinforce previous negative perceptions of school that a parent may hold (Fazio & Zanno, 1981; Millar & Millar, 1996).

Chris’s perception of the school’s efforts to address the needs of her son was also a negative one; however, she held that her son was denied opportunities because of a lack of social capital. He did not have the history in the community from which other students benefitted. This lack of social capital not only prevented him from participating in extracurricular activities but also resulted in his inability to make connections with his school that may have helped him remain engaged in his education. Chris stated that prior to moving from the West Coast, her son played sports and was involved in extracurricular activities. When they moved to Ohio, she said, he “was kind of like an outsider, . . . and . . . the sport teams were local kids.” In ninth grade, her son “was on the football team, and he didn’t really make the cut . . . ‘cause the other kids were kids that had lived here and grown up and were stars and stuff on the football team.” Chris’s description of her perceptions show her distrust of the criteria by which children were selected to play on the football team.

According to the inferences made by Chris, other people viewed those who came from elsewhere as outsiders; and those who made decisions about team membership cut outsiders from the team. She inferred that coaches did not view outsiders as stars. Coaches viewed local kids as “stars and stuff”; therefore, she perceived that only local students benefited from certain privileges, including positions on the football team.

Thus, Chris developed perceptions about those who made decisions in her family’s new
community. According to Chris, this loss of privilege resulted in her son’s waning interest in school. Her perception was consistent with Bourdieu’s (1973) findings regarding access to and value placed on various cultural experiences.

Parents’ perceptions were also influenced by various other circumstances outside the school environment. Those influences included circumstances related to family stressors and influences upon the child, such as lack of parental guidance, employment issues, and transience (Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Student factors included lack of social competence (Cash & Duttweiler, 2005), unstructured time and conduct disorders (Garbarino, 1998b), and other complex relationships (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Several researchers (Garbarino; 1998b; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Vera & Shin, 2006) found that these outside forces damage families’ and children’s positive sense of self, creating what Vera and Shin (2006) called strength-limiting environments (p. 83) that intensify “the challenging task of raising children in a socially toxic environment” (Garbarino, 1998b). According to Garbarino (1998b) “the more troubled and impoverished a parent, the less effective he or she will be in identifying, soliciting, and making effective use of resources outside of the family”; he advocated for supportive educational environments with role models who can assist children with the coping skills needed to thrive. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) recommended the creation of “social spaces where young people have the opportunity to share, listen, and learn from each other” (p. 92). Vera and Shin (2006) encouraged the organization of after-school programs in which parents could meet with administrators in order to share
their concerns and develop solutions to problems that could improve the lives of their children.

**Discussion**

The goal of this grounded theory investigation was to build theory to inform an understanding of how parents whose children engage in chronic absenteeism experience the school environment when dealing with their children’s attendance. From the parents’ perspective I examined the behavioral processes that occurred during parent–child negotiations over school attendance and elicited from parents ways that school personnel can help them improve student attendance and foster better home–school relationships. I used an investigative approach in an effort to determine potential barriers in parent–school collaboration, specifically looking at parent experiences in the school setting and the role they play in parent–child negotiations about school attendance. In this chapter I examined themes that emerged during the analysis process. The first theme was bridges and barriers to school attendance; the following categories surfaced in this theme: connectedness, communication, caring–uncaring behavior, educational environments, and being school-wise. The second theme that emerged was circumstances detrimental to the development of bridges. Categories in this theme were parents’ experiences and influences upon the child according to parent.

**Impact of Bridges and Barriers**

Of the two themes that developed from this inquiry, the first involved the effect of school connectedness, home–school communication, caring and uncaring relationships,
educational environment, and being school-wise on the development of bridges and barriers to school attendance. Specifically, the discussion covers ways that students connect to their school, ways that school personnel communicate with families and the effectiveness of such communication, and parents’ perceptions of caring and uncaring school personnel. The effects of the educational environment on making connections and attributes associated with a sense of school belonging or lack of school success are also covered in this section. Finally, the influence that parent–child negotiations play when a child attempts to be absent from school are examined.

The influence of school connectedness. School connectedness is “the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3). Students who feel connected to school believe that their teachers care about them, develop positive relationships with others, and find opportunities to participate in programs and activities that they feel fit their personality and interests (Blum, 2005; Cothran & Ennis, 2000). By promoting students’ sense of connectedness, school personnel also promote “educational motivation, classroom engagement, [and] improved school attendance” (Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004, p. 233). Clearly, students who develop connections in their schools experience an increased sense of belonging and are therefore less likely to engage in chronic absenteeism. This perspective was shared by participants in this study and supported by current research on school connectedness and student engagement (Blum, 2005; Cothran & Ennis, 2000).
**The influence of home–school communication.** The parents in this inquiry valued education. Lynn stated, “All parents want their kids to have better.” One way to ensure student engagement is to provide access to programs that enrich the educational experiences of students and provide a safety net to ensure that they do not fall through the cracks. Parents in this study believed that the school lacked equal access to participation in athletics because of the competitive nature of high school sports; furthermore, the school had no intramural athletic program. Other extracurricular programs that might have benefitted participants’ children as well as vocational programming and academic assistance resources were available at the school; however, the interest of several of the children was athletics, but they were excluded from the teams.

Participants acknowledged that they knew that much of the school communication about available programs occurred through electronic means, including websites, electronic newsletters, emails, and social media. When parents inquired about support programs to help their children when they experienced difficulties, they often found securing such information challenging. Often school personnel were unsure of what programs might benefit struggling students. Parents were seldom invited to school for face-to-face meetings to discuss available resources. None of the participants received home visits from school personnel, a strategy that has been demonstrated to improve student attendance and family involvement (Auerbach, 2009; Epstein et al., 2002). Parents’ often expressed their belief that school personnel failed to include them in exploring options for their children, something that Lareau and Horvat (1999) found
important in their research on parent involvement in schools. Barriers blocked the communication of information about available programs.

As I reviewed data from the interviews with parents looking for the emerging category of home–school communication, I found varying perspectives on ways that school administrators could facilitate open communication. Efforts to communicate electronically or through letters and phone calls were not always deemed effective as means of communicating. Chris said that her son deleted phone messages school personnel left for her and that she was unable to check the electronic gradebook or receive personal emails at work. Effective measures to ensure communication between the school and parents are an important feature of positive school experiences. I discovered a discrepancy between what school personnel believe to be positive efforts to communicate with parents and how parents experience such efforts to communicate with them. This parent perception was supported by research (Bridgeland et al., 2008; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; National Center for School Engagement, 2006) and the experiences described by the participants in this study.

When school personnel communicated with parents about their children’s progress or lack of it, they built opportunities to strengthen the home–school connection and to collaborate on possible solutions. Efforts by school personnel to communicate with parents through electronic resources were beneficial to families with access to these resources; however, the assumption that parents have access to electronic means of communicating (email, electronic gradebook, and teacher webpages) has been misplaced,
creating barriers to positive communication. As suggested by parents in this study and as shown in the results of other studies (Allen, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), school personnel must investigate reasons that efforts to communicate with parents are unsuccessful and find alternatives that afford parents the information they need in order to collaborate with the school to provide positive outcomes for their children. Parents in this study suggested that efforts to communicate with parents should include home visits, evening hours, weekend appointments, and ensuring that communication home via phone message or mail reach the targeted audience. Bridgeland et al. (2008) found

a clear correlation between the kind of outreach to parents a school performs and the level of involvement and satisfaction of those parents. A real or perceived lack of effort on the part of the school correlates highly with lower levels of involvement and satisfaction. (p. 21)

All but one parent indicated that the schools efforts to communicate with them were unsuccessful.

**Influence of caring–uncaring relationships.** At times throughout this study parents referred to experiences that they associated with caring and uncaring behaviors by school personnel directed toward them and their children. Examples include Robin’s reference to the attendance aide as a “wonderful lady,” the counselor’s having “a lot of compassion,” the intervention specialist who “really helped,” the teacher who called Drew to let her know that her son might not pass and helped to keep her informed on his
progress. An affectionate tone surfaced as Lynn recalled that the teachers at her son’s previous school “loved him, just loved him” and as she reminisced about her special education classes: “I loved it.” Parents cited these types of experiences as positive ones that helped to improve overall school outcomes.

Parents in this study shared twice as many negative experiences as positive ones. These experiences typically involved uncaring behaviors by teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel. Lynn conveyed the uncaring behavior of her son’s principal, whom she described as “there for a paycheck” and treating her son “like he was a nobody, just another number.” Chris felt that the teachers “weren’t there. [There] was no follow through.” Tracy felt let down after asking the attendance aide to notify her when her daughter did not show up at school; according to Tracy, the aide responded, “No I’m too busy.” These are just a few of the examples from parents that demonstrated the uncaring behaviors of school personnel. Instances of uncaring behaviors expressed by parents may be a manifestation of an educational system that is overwhelmed, a position verbalized by Robin:

They have their job, and the kids have their jobs. . . . They have their office work to do. . . . They can’t walk around and supervise every child. . . . They did the best they could do.

Perhaps training in the areas of empathy and relationship building was lacking; nevertheless, the role of the educational leader of the school is to provide leadership to
examine the causes of these adversarial relationships and to implement measures to ameliorate them.

A plethora of research and resources on creating positive family–school partnerships (Eastman et al., 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Vera & Shin, 2006) is available to assist administrators in building caring, respectful, and supportive relationship with families and students. Participants in this study and researchers (Cothran & Ennis, 2000) have demonstrated the importance of developing caring relationships, which are vital to improving parents’ and students’ perceptions of school personnel.

**Influence of the educational environment.** Participants in this study stated that their children attended a variety of school types, including traditional, online, private, and homeschool. The reason for choosing one option over another was often either a personal decision made by each family or a court-mandated decree. The reason for choosing one educational environment over another was specifically related to a sense of caring, available opportunities, and options that met a specific need resulting from life circumstances.

Parents have many options when determining where to educate their children. No longer are parents required to send them to neighborhood schools, and increasing numbers of states have passed legislation requiring local school boards to pay for private and online schooling options. Lynn stated, “All parents want their kids to have better.” This is another area where leadership is needed in order to improve home–school
relationships and develop home–school partnerships; however, principals cannot do this alone. The leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership can play a valuable role (Spillane & Camburn, 2006). By mobilizing teachers, parents, and the community, school leaders can gather resources to address deficiencies in the school environment (lack of tutoring, mentors, financial resources, and liaisons to community resources) and provide parents with avenues to collaborate with school personnel (Brooks et al, 2007). By creating conditions in which parent and community leadership in the school is valued, the school leader can improve opportunities to sustain momentum for change, facilitate perseverance “despite obstacles and setbacks,” build political capital, and produce authentic change in policy to reflect community concerns (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 115). Such opportunities enable parents to develop social capital and thus benefit the parent, child, school, and community (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). School leaders who fail take advantage of such collaborations run the risk of alienating parents and students and thus suffer the consequences of declining enrollment and associated consequences like lay-offs, school reorganization, and school closure.

**Influence of being school-wise.** As noted in the previous chapter, the term *school-wise* is a code that emerged from the first interview; the concept is associated a sense of belonging and success at school as experienced by either the student or the parent. A student who experiences a sense of belonging, which is a school factor, holds a general perception that school is engaging and relevant (Baker et al., 2001; Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Sheverbush & Smith, 2000). School
success is a student factor in which students experience a general perception that academic progress is possible and has value; such students develop a positive sense of academic and social competence (Baker et al., 2001; Cash & Duttweiler, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). Students who experience a sense of belonging at school take pride in their school, develop social capital, and often experience fewer problematic behaviors. This finding is consistent with research on the development of social capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Students who struggle academically, socially, or emotionally in the school environment may develop a sense of alienation and are, therefore, the opposite of school-wise. As shown in this study and supported in the literature (Gonzales et al., 2002; Morse & Christenson, 2004; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004), these students are more likely to develop problematic behaviors, including chronic absenteeism. Not only does this manifest as a sense of alienation in the child, but it also reinforces in the parent a lack of a sense of belonging. According to the participants’ experiences, students who struggled in school were not school-wise, demonstrated in feelings of frustration and despair. Experiences such as these can make supporting school policies difficult for parents, especially when they believe that the school has failed to meet the needs of their children, a view consistent with the current research on parent-condoned truancy (Reid, 1999; 2000, 2002; Sheppard, 2005).
Impact of Circumstances Toxic to the Development of Bridges

The second theme that emerged during analysis was circumstances detrimental to the development of bridges. This theme included parents’ experiences in the school environment and influences upon the child according to the parent. Parents’ prior experiences, parents’ hopes and concerns, legal troubles surrounding children’s behavior, and family stressors influenced parents’ experiences and at times contributed to stressful family dynamics. The second subcategory, influences upon the child according to the parent, consists solely of influences that fell within the realm of negative social forces (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In this environment, the dimensions of the child’s life were influenced by student behavioral issues and suspected learning disabilities, transformative events in the child’s life, and negative influences of others on the child. The compounding effect of the influence of family dynamics and negative social forces experienced by the student contributed to a toxic environment, which in turn, had a degrading effect on family and child resilience, an assertion supported by research (Garbarino, 1998b; Smith, 2006).

Influence of family stressors. In their interviews, participants referred to issues of family dynamics that interfered with their ability to support school attendance rules. Drew’s interview provided some insight on how family dynamics influence a parent’s responses to school related issues. She said:

If . . . he wanted to avoid something, he would have this type of behavior. Some days I thought he was at school all day, and then I would find out later that he wasn’t. I
had talked to him . . . several times. We took things away, but I found that when I did take things away that he would find a way around it or it made our lives more chaotic. It would cause problems in our family because one of us would have—after working maybe a long day and driving out of town for your job and then take him and drop him off here—have to go pick them up. So some of this I blame myself because I didn’t hold the line, ‘cause I gave in, . . . but then I realized that at one point that it was out of my control. If he missed something, I couldn’t control it anymore because I have a big job that I am in charge of; and I have to get to work. And I had to almost put it out of my mind, and I just pray that he would do the right thing.

Drew’s comments demonstrated that she was conflicted. She wanted to “do the right thing” and ensure that her son attended school regularly. She “took everything away,” which included his personal means of transportation. Her actions to support school rules by administering consequences at home had a direct adverse effect on the family. In research on family structure, processes, and adolescent well-being, Demo and Acock (1996) studied the impact of family structures on the well-being of adolescents and found that “measures of mother–adolescent relations were strong predictors of adolescent outcomes” (¶ 56). Equally significant is their finding that “disagreement with mothers was also associated with lower grades in school for adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies” (¶ 56). As noted throughout the participants’ interviews, many instances of family conflict occurred; these comprised school conflict, legal issues, the negative influence of others, and mother–adolescent disagreement. The research was
clear that “family conflict—manifested in diverse ways and persisting over stages of the life course—impairs adolescent well-being” (Demo & Acock, 1996, ¶ 65). Instances of family conflict also contribute to the toxicity of the environment and affect the overall well-being of the child.

**Influence of toxic environments.** The lives of contemporary families are sometimes very complicated, marked by employment concerns, financial struggles, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, loss, trauma, mental illness, or other issues. The effect on the children or the family structure in general can be difficult to determine. The stress may also motivate a reprioritizing of family needs, which damages the environment and diminishes or degrades the lives of the children, affecting the way the parent defines the school experiences. Garbarino (1997) referred to these toxic environments in terms of social forces, defined in Theme 2 as part of the following subcategories: parents’ experiences and influences upon the child according to the parent. In most cases, these forces tended to have a negative or diminishing impact on access to support resources, degrading parents’ perceptions of the school environment (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Evidence of these perceptions appears in the following examples.

Chris shared her story about the difficulties she had securing help from the school or court system in her new community. Maintaining that she was unaware that her son missed as much school as he had, she attributed some of this lack of knowledge to the actions of her son: He deleted telephone messages from the school. Chris stated that school personnel had not done enough to keep her informed about her son’s difficulties in
school: “It seems to me they should have made a bigger effort to get a hold of me to come in for a meeting about it after school and stuff.” Eventually, Chris and her son were referred to juvenile court for the truancy and as a result were required to participate in family counseling. Chris felt that her son should have received consequences at school. She stated:

School consequences? No consequences were given. OK, let’s suspend him for three days for being absent from school. I mean, what good does that do to a kid? You know, let’s put him in some kind of in-school suspension, or let’s try and do something, or does he need to see someone, you know? Is there a problem with him? Is he attention deficit, or does he have something? Chris believed that underlying causes, such as an attention disorder, influenced her son’s behavior; but she felt school personnel refused to address them. Chris wanted assistance in addressing the cause of her son’s desire to leave school as shown in her desire for his detention. She said:

Then put the kid in JDC [Juvenile Detention Center] and school him in JDC, where they are in a controlled or monitored environment, where they can force him to do something. ‘Cause there was kids that would go there. But they never kept him long enough. Because, I guess, maybe ‘cause he was a White middle-class kid. I don’t know.

Chris’s comments revealed her belief that the courts discriminated against her son because of his race (Caucasian) and economic status (middle-class). Although she apparently
believed that an “injury of class” had occurred (Sennett & Cobb, 1972), a lack of cultural capital was a more likely factor (Gorman, 1998). She felt the need to advocate for services for her family, specifically those through which she could access assistance for her son’s difficulties. She believed the court system held the key to this access: Incarcerated children receive an education because they are forced to attend school. She also believed that students of African and Hispanic descent and students in households with incomes in the poverty range received benefits that were denied to her son. “There are limited resources, and the people who use the system work it to their advantage” (Gorman, 1998, p. 33). Chris believed that others had access to resources that were denied to her and her son.

**Summary**

Parents in this study reported deficiencies in the opportunities and options available to their children, a general lack of communication, a lack of caring adults, adults indifferent to student or family needs, educational environments that failed to meet the needs of their children, and a failure by school personnel to identify and address the learning deficiencies of students. District personnel can address negative parent perceptions of schools and work to counter the effects of socially toxic environments by developing policies aimed at welcoming students and families to the school community and promoting inclusive home–school collaborations as well as by developing safety nets for at-risk children. School personnel must avoid assumptions that the current means of connecting with families improve home–school communication and instead reach out to those parents who have traditionally not been a part of the home–school partnership.
**Recommendations**

School personnel should use a multifaceted approach to identify at-risk students. Although circumstances indicating students are at-risk differ from child to child, the one feature they all have in common is that their life circumstances are such that their future outcomes are bleak (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). Many such students live in environments that degrade their sense of hope or will to strive. School authorities must be proactive in establishing procedures to identify such youth, evaluate their individual circumstances, and develop a plan that helps them to access school in ways that meet their individual needs according to their interests and talents. School procedures to identify youth at-risk for dropping out of school should include an early warning system for identifying characteristic specific to their student population (Jerald, 2006). Early warning systems, such as the ones identified by Jerald (2006), can be helpful in identifying risk factors unique to the school, community, and student population.

Poor attendance is one consistent characteristic that helps to identify at-risk youth. Using a case management approach to address student attendance issues can be an effective way to identify circumstances that lead to excessive absences and provide resources to support youth (“Alliance for Excellent Education,” 2004; American Bar Association, 2012). Developing and implementing an attendance intervention plan (see Appendix A) can help school administrators collaborate with students, parents, educators, and community resources in order to identify barriers to school attendance and address
students’ individual needs. Such a goal will be a difficult one to accomplish for students who have lost faith in the traditional education system, which is why creating partnerships with the students and families is paramount to any hope for success.

Positive adult–student relationships are also fundamental to building positive school connections. Another factor detrimental to “strength development is the lack of connection that youth have to their communities” (Vera & Shin, 2006). Schools must develop staff–student mentoring programs that provide students with a caring adult who can provide a safety net to ensure that students do not fall through the cracks (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006); however, a greater issue is finding ways to promote activities that include all students. High schools often focus on encouraging skilled athletes to join competitive athletic programs, leaving many children unable to find niches where they can explore their talents. Athletic programs can be very expensive to operate, causing difficulties in establishing school-sponsored intramural sports. Nevertheless, without such activities how do children with limited access to school-related recreation find their niches? Many schools have relinquished the task to community-based athletic programs, which can be equally competitive. School leaders must find ways to fund intramural athletic activities in order to provide high school youth with an equal sense of connectedness. Failure to do so reinforces students’ sense that they do not belong.

One way that school personnel can counter the effects that socially toxic environments on home–school relationships is to welcome students and families to the school community (Auerbach, 2009). Decades ago, community organizations and
churches sponsored Welcome Wagons, potluck dinners, and other means of receiving new homeowners into the community. These activities helped to establish positive relationships and build a sense of belonging. School personnel can do this by organizing community resource fairs, inviting students and parents to contribute and participate in school committees, and providing onsite students and family resources centers individualized according to community characteristics. The connections among families, communities, schools, and public policies are important in building children’s strengths (Vera & Shin, 2006). This type of community building can help connect recently relocated students and families to their new school and reconnect those who have lost faith.

Sending welcome letters to recently relocated parents, providing a calendar of upcoming events and activities as well as a brief explanation of how to access school resources may help to acclimate parents and build bridges that provide access to school resources. These might also include workshops for parents on accessing student-specific electronic gradebooks, teacher websites, classroom blogs and Twitter pages, and other forms of electronic communication. In the same vein, sending high school students a letter of welcome and invitations to school activities, clubs, and events can help students bridge the divide that opens when they enroll at a new school. Inviting families and students into the school community can “improve families’ capacity to rear children resilient to social toxins [and is] critical to building resiliency” (Vera & Shin, 2006, p. 84). Such efforts can help to create avenues for both school-connectedness and a sense of
caring as well as improve efforts to communicate with parents; however, attempts to engage families and student cannot stop there.

Some school personnel believe that electronic resources used to communicate student progress with families help to improve parents’ knowledge of their children’s academic strengths and weaknesses. In many schools nearly all efforts to communicate with families face-to-face, via mail, and by phone have been eliminated. Budget constraints, which have reduced school support personnel, have caused a reliance on electronic resources instead of sending report cards, progress reports, letters about absenteeism, and other types of notifications to homes via postal mail. As shown in the experiences of the participants, these methods of corresponding with parents are often ineffective in communicating with families struggling with their children’s chronic absenteeism. Parents simply do not receive the information. School personnel erroneously assume that parents who do not respond to these types of correspondence create conditions that erect barriers contributing to what Smith (2006) called a strength-limiting environment.

School personnel who wish to promote positive communication with parents must regularly ensure that parents have access to these electronic means of communication, and if they do not have such access, alternate means of communicating must be available. School administrators should survey parents to determine the best means of communicating with individual families; however, gathering information on the best way to communicate with families cannot stop there. School personnel must regularly survey
all parents to ensure that they are communicating with parents using means that are accessible to them. Although some parents have no trouble following the school on Twitter or tracking children’s progress on the electronic grade book, many others have no access to electronic means of communicating or are unfamiliar with the technology or find home visits and phone calls more personal (Auerbach, 2009). This means that school personnel may have to individualize the methods used to communicate with families to ensure that they meet the needs of all of their families.

School administrators may learn from this study that taking an approach to working with students and families resembling the type used in the service industry may be beneficial in building bridges to support a healthy home–school relationship. In particular, they might find survey techniques used in customer service helpful in understanding how parents and students perceive the school environment. Although surveys and questionnaires are administered at many schools at the end of the school year in order to acquire parents and students’ opinions, the data gathered is often outdated and unreliable because of the effect of time on memory. Distributing customer service surveys after interactions with individuals or groups of parents and students might yield better data on perceptions. Such surveys could be useful for administrators’ professional development in improving home–school relationships and collaboration (Ramirez, 2001). A free school-satisfaction survey resource that can be tailored to the characteristics and needs of a school is available online (Stakeholder Satisfaction Surveys, 2009).
Suggestions for Future Research

Many children come from families without access to technology. For some families, the collective cost of owning personal electronic devices (cost of Internet and device) are beyond their financial means. Some parents find that their use of employer-owned electronic devices is strictly monitored or prohibited. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (Ellis & Simmons, 2014), 2.7 million grandparents are primary caregivers of grandchildren under the age of 18. Many senior citizens have difficulty mastering technology (Seals, Clanton, Agarwal, Doswell, & Thomas, 2008); hence its use can be a significant barrier to effective school communication.

At many schools the use of various technological resources has been implemented in the name of improving home–school communication and collaboration. Although research has been done on the successful use of electronic means of communicating with families, especially in suburban communities, no research currently exists on the possible adverse effects of the assumption that these modes of sharing information with families improve home–school communication. I do not mean to imply that communicating with parents through electronic means is detrimental to the home–school collaboration process. The concern here is that in schools throughout the United States, heavy reliance on electronic forms of communicating with parents has virtually eliminated newsletters, progress reports, interim reports, or school report cards sent by postal mail. Further investigation of this assumption is warranted (Graham-Clay, 2005; Ramirez, 2001).
This study dealt with the perspective of parents whose children engaged in chronic absenteeism; however, I did not focus on the perspective of school personnel or students. Researchers have focused individually on the perspective of school personnel as well as on students’ perspectives; however, many times throughout this study I felt including an incident from the perspective of the not only the parent but also the student and school personnel involved would have been helpful. In a study that includes the perspective of others beside parents, the root cause of the communication breakdown that at times exacerbates problems may be identified; therefore, I recommend that researchers conduct individual case studies focusing on the dynamics of chronic absenteeism.

Coda

In this constructivist grounded theory study I explored the experiences of parents whose children engaged in chronic absenteeism in an effort to understand how they perceived the school environment when dealing with their children’s attendance. Data from interviews with the six parent participants indicate that their perceptions of the school environment did not derive from a single event but instead from their interactions with school personnel and their children. The framework I constructed to visualize the source of parent perceptions of the school environment included the impact of school connectedness, home–school communication, caring–uncaring relationships, the educational environment, and being school-wise on the development of bridges and barriers to school attendance. Opportunities for connections, experiences with school communication, the quality of relationships, experiences unique to individual educational
environments, and their children’s ability to benefit from the academic program were the building blocks in the construction of bridges or barriers between the parent and school. When parents perceived the experiences to be positive in nature, they often expressed an overall positive perception of the school environment; however, when they perceived the experiences to be mostly negative in nature, they perceived the school environment negatively.

The framework also helped to establish the influence that outside forces, including parents’ prior experiences, parents’ hopes for and concerns about their children, legal troubles, family stressors, and the influences that others, had on a parents’ perceptions of their children’s school experiences. When these outside forces were negative, they have a tendency to contribute to a socially toxic environment that can have an eroding effect of a parents’ perception of the school. For some parents, the more negative and demanding these forces were in their lives, the greater the effect on the way they experienced the school environment. Negative experiences reinforced barriers, limiting the child’s and family’s ability to benefit from the school environment.

These findings were supported by extensive research that indicated that these six participants were not alone in their experiences. Parents appeared to have difficulty supporting school policies when they believed that the individual needs of their children were not met in the school environment. For students who struggled with school attendance, parents looked to school officials to bring down barriers and assist them in alleviating the pressures that negatively impacted their children’s life outcomes. One
parent said, “All parents want their kids to have better.” Parents may not always know what their children need, but they often know what does and does not work for them. Unfortunately, a disconnection exists in communication between schools and parents that at times has a degrading effect on parents’ perceptions. School administrators can access a plethora of resources and expertise to enrich opportunities for their students. Educational leaders must act with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of their students and ensure engagement in two-way communication their families.
APPENDIXES
APPENDIX A

ATTENDANCE INTERVENTION PLAN
APPENDIX A

ATTENDANCE INTERVENTION PLAN

**Student Characteristics:**
- □ Low Achievement
- □ Poor Peer Relationships
- □ Health-related Issues
- □ Low Attendance
- □ Credit/Grade Deficiencies
- □ Frequent Mobility
- □ High Failure Rate
- □ Discipline Referrals
- □ Financial issues

Please specify the details of the attendance problem(s) checked above:

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

What are the student’s, parent/guardian’s and school personnel’s collaborative recommendations to solve the attendance problem?

- □

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

**Objectives/Strategies:** Please specify the objectives and timeline for completion.

- □ Student will accumulate no more than _______ number of absences in _______ period of time.
- □ Student will miss no more than __________ classes in _________ period of time.
- □ Other:

- □ Meet Attendance Target
- □ Improve Test Scores
- □ Reduce Discipline Referrals
- □ Modify class Schedule
- □ Attend Tutoring
- □ Meet with Counselor
- □ Community Service
- □ Attend Remediation

**Follow-up Plan**

When is the next meeting to review achievement of attendance improvement recommendations?

_________________________________________________________________

Weekly attendance monitored by: ________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Administrative Signature        Plan Approval Date

© 2007 Victoria Swarta
Student Characteristics:
- Low Achievement
- Low Attendance
- High Failure Rate
- Poor Peer Relationships
- Credit/Grade Deficiencies
- Discipline Referrals
- Health-related Issues
- Frequent Mobility
- Financial issues

Please specify the details of the attendance problem(s) checked above.

What are the student’s, parent/guardian’s and school personnel’s collaborative recommendations to solve the attendance problem?
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________

Objectives/Strategies: Please specify the objectives and timeline for completion.
- Student will accumulate no more than ________ number of absences in ________ period of time.
- Student will miss no more than ___________ classes in ___________ period of time.
- Other: ________________________________________
- Meet Attendance Target
- Reduce Discipline Referrals
- Attend Tutoring
- Improve Test Scores
- Modify class Schedule
- Meet with Counselor
- Community Service
- Attend Remediation

Follow-up Plan

When is the next meeting to review achievement of attendance improvement recommendations?

Weekly attendance monitored by: ____________________________

Administrative Signature ____________________________

Plan Approval Date ____________________________
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INVITATION
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INVITATION

My name is Nancy Wood Allison, and as a former school Superintendent and Curriculum Director, I believe that good communication is important to positive home-school relationships. However, there are times that school personnel fail to understand how parents experience the school environment when dealing with the school. That is why I believe exploring this relationship is important. As a mentor to the researcher, Victoria Swartz, I encourage you to consider participating in her study, “How parents of chronically absent students experience the school environment: A grounded theory study.”

The purpose of this study is to hear the stories of parents whose children experience chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of how parents experience the school environment. The goal of the researcher is to help school administrators understand what families experience when dealing with the school so that they can improve how schools work with families.

If you decide to participate in the study, your involvement will consist of one (1) initial interview of no more than ninety (90) minutes in length. When necessary, you may be asked to participate in one (1) additional ninety (90) follow-up interview. However, you can choose not to participate in either interview.

In gratitude for your participation, you will be given a fifteen dollar gift certificate as a token of appreciation for your time for each interview in which you participate.

In order to ensure accuracy of information, each interview will be tape recorded for accuracy. Each tape will then be transcribed and the tape will be permanently erased. You will receive a written transcription of your interview.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you will be free to refuse or stop at any time without penalty. All information will be number coded at strictly confidential. Your identity will not be revealed without your written consent.

Sincerely,

Nancy Wood-Allison

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the researcher or the researcher’s advisor.

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Kent State University, Advisor
Dr. Susan Iverson
330-672-2580
siverson@kent.edu
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Participants (Name): ___________________________________ Date:____________

_____ Give participant gift card.

_____ Read/review informed consent. Obtain signatures and give participant copy.

_____ Read/review audio consent. Obtain signatures and give participant copy.

_____ Ask if there are any questions before we begin.

_____ Ask for permission to begin recording. If granted, begin recorder and inform participant that the recorder is on.

_____ Give participant a copy of child’s high school attendance record by both daily and period view. Review attendance record and answer any questions.

Let’s begin by reviewing ______________ attendance for the ________ school year. It looks he/she missed ________ days during _______.

1. Thinking back to that time, what do you recall about his/her attendance? What do you remember about that?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. There were a lot of excused and unexcused absences. In thinking about his/her attendance, can you recall why he/she missed so many days? What did you think about that?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
3. Do you remember the reason for those absences? Do you recall if there were times when you believed that __________ was not ill but asked you for permission to stay home from school anyway? What do you recall about that?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

a. Do you remember how this began?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

b. What reason did __________ give you for these absences?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

4. How did this (experience with school attendance issues) affect your relationship with (child) _______________?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

5. What was the school’s reaction about _________ absences? What happened as a result of this?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
6. Thinking back to when you were in school, can you recall a similar experience from your own childhood? If so, tell me about that.

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

7. What was the school’s reaction when these things were taking place? What did they do/say regarding this?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

8. How do you feel the school responded to your child’s attendance issues? What did they do/say regarding this?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

9. Can you share an example of a time when you contacted someone at school regarding your child’s absences?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

10. How would you describe your relationship with teachers at the school?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
11. How would you describe your relationship with (attendance aide, secretary, guidance counselor, principal) at the school?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

12. How would you describe the relationship between parents and school officials regarding school attendance?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

13. How do you feel you were treated by the school when dealing with your child’s attendance issues?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

14. Is there anything else that the school could have done to assist you or your son/daughter?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding these experiences?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Follow-up

________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: How parents of chronically absent children experience the school environment: A grounded theory study—fall semester 2012

Principal Investigator: Victoria V. Swartz

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to hear the stories of parents whose children engage in chronic absenteeism in an effort to develop an understanding of how parents experience the school environment regarding their child’s attendance. The goal of the principal investigator is to help school administrators understand what families experience when dealing with the school regarding their child’s attendance so that we can improve how schools work with families.

Procedures
Parents of students, who accumulated 10 or more days of both excused and unexcused absences from school during the 2009-10, 2010-11, or 2011-12 school year, are asked to participate in one (1) initial interview of no more than ninety (90) minutes in length and one (1) follow-up interview of no more than ninety (90) minutes in length. You will be asked a few questions in order to help you share your experiences within the school environment regarding your child’s attendance. You will be asked to reflect on conversations you have had regarding the nature of the absences, to reflect on interactions you have experienced with your child and within the school environment regarding the absences, and to reflect on how you feel you were treated regarding the absences.

Risks
- It is possible that talking about your experiences within the school environment may make you feel uncomfortable.
- There are no other foreseeable risks for the adult participants in the project.

Benefits
- You will have the opportunity to review your audio tapes and the written transcripts of your interview if you desire in order to ensure that the principal investigator accurately describes your experiences.
The principal investigator will work to assist any participant who expresses a need for help in acquiring assistance from local social service organizations as a result of issues which may arise from participating in this study. One example of assistance may be in helping a family acquire clothing in order for a child to attend school or help is getting assistance from the Family Resource Center. These opportunities will depend on the particular service-participation criteria, as well as program availability.

As a participant, you may benefit from knowing that your assistance with this study has the potential to improve our understanding of how parents experience the school environment.

Privacy and Confidentiality
To protect your privacy and anonymity, pseudonyms will be used in material that will be published or publicly displayed. I will further disguise, alter, or remove identifiers that could reveal your identity. In addition, the name and location of the school and other identifiers will be protected. All information will be number coded and kept strictly confidential. Your identity will not be revealed without your written consent. During the project, all written data will be stored in a secured area under conditions that limit their access to any except the principal investigator and the principal investigator’s advisors. After the completion of the project, the data for this study will be stored for an indefinite period of time the private office of principal investigator and will be reviewed only by her.

Compensation
In gratitude for your participation, you will be given a fifty dollar gift card as a token of appreciation for your time for each interview in which you participate.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the study with no consequence. In order to ensure accuracy of information, each interview will be tape recorded for accuracy. You will receive a written transcription of your interview. Any time prior to the submission of the research to the dissertation committee, you may request to clarify information or have part or all of your contribution struck.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact the principal investigator, Victoria Swartz at 419-348-5935 or Dr. Susan Iverson at 330-672-2580. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may contact IRB, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (Tel. 330.672.2704).

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature

Date
APPENDIX E

AUDIO CONSENT FORM
APPENDIX E

AUDIO CONSENT FORM

[Form content]
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


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