

Here, there, and everywhere: A phenomenological case study exploring barriers to class attendance

by
Rachel Johnson

Special Education Certificate, Queens University, 2019
Bachelor of Education, Simon Fraser University, 2014
Bachelor of Arts (English), Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2012

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Education

in the
Educational Leadership Program
Faculty of Education

© Rachel Johnson 2023
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2023

Copyright in this work is held by the author. Please ensure that any reproduction or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.

Declaration of Committee

Name: Rachel Johnson

Degree: Master of Education

Title: Here, there, and everywhere: A phenomenological case study exploring barriers to class attendance

Committee:

Chair: Gillian Judson
Assistant Professor, Education

Michelle Nilson
Supervisor
Associate Professor, Education

Rebecca Cox
Committee Member
Associate Professor, Education

Dan Laitsch
Examiner
Associate Professor, Education

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

- c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Update Spring 2016

Abstract

Absences and disengagement appear to be at a high in secondary schools with seemingly disinterested or apathetic students avoiding classes. While student absences have been studied extensively, the new phenomenon of 'internal truancy' (students attending school but avoid classes) is still a mystery evading most educators. Using a phenomenological case study approach, and exploring the experiences of a single, chronically avoidant, high school student, the causes of this recently increased avoidant behaviour are explored in hopes of supporting future interventions and further research into re-engagement for our avoidant students. Insights provided highlighted challenges with the self, family, peers and, interestingly, a struggle with the transition from elementary to secondary school and the implicit impact this has had on the longitudinal educational experiences of a single high school student. Overarching themes pointed toward issues with visibility, consistency and a struggle between power and powerlessness. The findings within will aid in informing future strategies to support vulnerable students in high school settings.

Keywords: internal truancy; avoidance; absence; disengagement; secondary schools

For my Dad who inspires me to do big things and never give up. You are with me always.

Acknowledgements

Simon Fraser University respectfully acknowledges the x^wməθk^wəy^əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səliłwətaʔt (Tseil-Waututh), qíćəy (Katzie), k^wik^wəłəm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen peoples on whose unceded traditional territories our three campuses reside.

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Michelle Nilson, whose unwavering support and encouragement inspired me to keep working towards my goals. Many thanks to my other professors who each shared their knowledge and passion for education in fascinating ways.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Ethics Statement	iii
Abstract	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Acronyms	viii
Glossary	ix
Introduction	1
Literature Review	3
Methodology	6
The Research Question	7
Researcher Role/Positionality	7
Research Site/Participants	8
Participant	9
Data Collection	10
Data Analysis	12
Findings	14
Visibility	14
Consistency	15
Power/Powerlessness	17
Discussion	18
Limitations	19
Conclusion	20
References	22
Appendix A. Pre-Interview Questionnaire	25
Appendix B. Interview Protocol	26

List of Acronyms

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
SFU	Simon Fraser University

Glossary

ACES

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Chronic absence

Absence in excess of 10% of classes or 18 days missed.

Internal truancy

Phenomenon of students attending the school each day but avoiding classes

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, schools are functioning as ever-evolving landscapes with diverse dynamics where students and staff are navigating both educational and social/emotional gaps in learning. cursory research into trends of attendance indicates that attendance in Canadian schools is falling, and student engagement is at risk. While occasional absence is not likely to become problematic, sustained absences may have lifelong, detrimental effects on students. As all students attempt to re-engage in traditional learning, staff and students are struggling and there may be a shift in the needs of students on a grander scale. The impact of increased absences and reduced expectations associated with virtual learning has seemingly made it challenging for students to reverse the clock and engage as they may have before. Just as the world has changed, so has education and most importantly, so have students.

Based on personal observations and peer consultations, many teachers and administrators are noting a shift in behaviours and are feeling like students are met with more barriers than before. There are many complex facets to the disengagement of students and identifying areas of need to design interventions is key, however, it is challenging to address an issue without first identifying it.

School communities can see that students are struggling but the root causes are evidently evasive; when students are visibly disengaging and support is available, why are students struggling and how can we possibly help them? Several studies in absenteeism and disengagement identify anxiety and related mental illness as key contributors to avoidance but these explanations cannot be assumed as universal. While there is robust research around avoidant learners, there is limited literature informed solely by student voice and perspective. The shifting in behaviours of students has made way for a more recent phenomenon to grow and flourish in high school settings, that of sustained attendance in the school building but a consistent propensity to avoid attending actual classes. While this may seem to be a relatively unique occurrence, cursory research has yielded anecdotal reporting of this phenomenon across many districts and regions, and it has colloquially been termed 'internal truancy.'

I have had the immense privilege to work supporting vulnerable youth in the capacity of a case manager and learning support teacher and, in this time, have seen changes that are largely immeasurable but certainly palatable. In my current role, it is not uncommon to see droves of students roaming halls, avoiding classes, and taking refuge in washrooms. Students are often spotted in spaces outside of direct view of staff, hoping to fade into the background of the halls. Although this sight is common, it is also perplexing. Why would students arrive at school, remain in the building yet avoid their classes? When first considering this routine, I thought, perhaps, the explanation would be simplistic in nature; maybe students 'just don't feel like it' or maybe, peers are just that much more exciting than trigonometry. In an attempt to uncover the motivations behind this avoidance, I simply and casually asked and, the response was largely, "I don't know." This answer got me wondering, while understanding that students who are absent from class will be marked as such, why would they come at all? What brings them here? Why don't they just leave? But, as bluntly put by students, I simply did not know. Although the causation evaded me, the impact of such behaviour is clear – students who do not attend and engage in their classes will not be successful. This led to my next ponderance, "what are we going to do to help?" Like any complex issue, effectiveness is lost when unfocused interventions are attempted. So, in order to work towards addressing the issue, I first needed to aim to understand it and the only way to truly explore such a phenomenon was to explore the stories of the students themselves. To gain a deeper understanding authentic student voice is essential; what do students believe is preventing them from attending and engaging in their classes while remaining in the school building?

Attendance and chronic absenteeism are complex issues and by gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers students face, school communities could become supportive environments where systems work with those struggling to attend rather acting against them. Limited research has been found from the perspective of the avoidant students and even less literature explores the phenomenon of students attending school but avoiding scheduled classes. This study will explore student experiences and perspectives of their own reticence to attend and engage in their classes. This case studies will shed light on the individual experiences of a student who attends school but does not consistently attend classes throughout the day. By conducting a phenomenological case study into the stories and experiences of this

student, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers this student perceives as inhibiting his ability to engage with school. Understanding the challenges of our vulnerable students and giving them space to share their stories is the key initial step in eventual assessment of support strategies. Future research could be aimed at identifying practical interventions to assist in re-engaging vulnerable learners in the traditional school setting. Once effective strategies are identified, implementation could be used in a preventative manner rather than as triage or reactive practice.

Literature Review

From 2015-2018, absenteeism was rising in Canadian schools with an increase of 5.4% of classes missed and 23.3% of students missing more than 20% of their classes (Birioukov, 2021). Intuitively, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the numbers are further rising. The circumstances behind absenteeism are unique to each student but research addresses several common causes as identified through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research.

Studies have identified internal (student focused) and external (home and community focused) reasons for absenteeism, which may make consistent attendance challenging (Birioukov, 2021; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2009; Sobba 2018). Identified internal factors include health, substance abuse, poor relationships with staff and peers, low academic achievement, personal demographics (race, cultural identify, sexual orientation or gender identity), personal views of education and perceived school climate (Bikioukov, 2021; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2009). External reasons include but are not limited to abuse, economic challenges, violence, low parental school engagement and neighborhood climate (Birioukov 2021; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2009; Sobba 2018).

Critical research into external influences on childhood outcomes includes studies on the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their lifelong impacts on student futures. “ACEs and early childhood stress influence developing bodies and brains of adolescents and can result in short- and long-term negative consequences such as learning, behavioural and physiological issues” (Webb et al., 2022). Students who report multiple ACEs may also demonstrate school disengagement and avoidance

(Webb et al., 2022). While the impact of ACEs may perpetuate the belief that these are atypical situations of adversity, the truth is, most students (and adults) have experienced multiple ACEs. While some are certainly viewed as significant by most, others are much more commonplace; “parental separation or divorce” and “peer isolation/rejection”, are among the ACEs that many can relate to and, when combined, may have dramatic impacts on the life trajectory of students (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Although external factors are challenging to mitigate, schools may prove crucial in supporting internal factors and assisting vulnerable learners with active re-engagement in schools. While schools may not be able to fully address the external factors weighing upon our students, there are opportunities to support students with working through mental health and school-based challenges. Research into the impact of student culture within the school setting have identified the importance of creating safe, nurturing spaces for students to learn (Arthur & Hannah, 2015; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Burton, 2011; Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Pas et al., 2011,2015; Pinkelman et al., 2015; Sobba, 2018).

Building trust in the school system could start with students identifying where the fractures begin and implementing strategies from there. Some re-engagement efforts will involve the entire school but there are major contributing internal factors that are much more personal; mental health challenges have been identified as a key element of absenteeism (Arthur & Hannah, 2015; Duncan et al., 2021; Finning et al., 2019). Studies have identified that anxiety and depression may make students more susceptible to frequent absence due to emotional regulation and even somatic illness (Duncan et al., 2021; Finning et al., 2019). School refusal can be a byproduct of mental health struggles that often progress from casual truancy to chronic avoidance. Students who avoid classes often show apathetic response to intervention and consequence from families and schools (Baker & Bishop, 2015). School days missed are easily quantifiable, yet the reasons behind this issue must be examined through qualitative measures. Studies note that anxiety and depression are linked to absenteeism with anxiety alone accounting for more missed days due to health (both mental and somatic), more classes skipped (often seen as truancy) and more disengagement (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Duncan et al., 2021; Finning et al., 2019;). Furthermore, anxiety can impact psychosocial wellbeing and can cause a cyclical pattern (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). While absence due to anxiety is understandable, this may facilitate a negative reinforcement where the relief felt from avoiding triggers for anxiety later creates more discomfort and further

disengagement (Hughes et al., 2009). Refusal due to anxiety negatively reinforces the 'reward' of suppressed anxiety when not attending but exacerbates the impact upon eventual return or, in worse cases, leads to complete school withdrawal. The seeking of immediate relief from extreme emotional discomfort creates reliance on escape and perpetuates emotional dysregulation (Duncan et al., 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2009). Sustained untreated anxiety may lead to more behaviours in adolescents seeking relief including substance abuse and eventual drop out (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2021).

The short-term impacts of absenteeism are often seen in academic performance and further disengagement, yet the long-term consequences may be more detrimental. Research shows that social alienation, strained relationships, substance abuse, work ethic and socioeconomic disadvantages are connected to school disengagement. School refusal may lead to drop out which may lead to difficult-to-reverse global challenges in the individual. Several studies examine differing factors causing anxiety and the findings agree that unsupported, unmitigated absences have significant consequences in the holistic well-being and development of students (Birioukov, 2021; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2021).

Literature exploring the experiences of students and their perspectives on engagement is sparse and there are notable gaps in research into the phenomenon colloquially identified as 'internal truancy.' By investigating the perspectives of a diverse minority of students we could cooperatively create strategies to support all students. Matt Baker and Felicity L. Bishop explore school refusal as a phenomenological occurrence that is seemingly absent in most current literature. While some studies exist, current research is lacking relevance and details that can be extrapolated to include a modern learner. Baker's and Bishop's work seeks to identify how students understand and interpret their absences while aiming to identify data that may inform future interventions (2015). While engagement and absence studies exist, there is a vast gap in research from the perspective of the avoidant student and even less regarding the recent phenomenon of internal truancy.

Methodology

While students are often encouraged to utilize skills that are presently underdeveloped, students are expected to be resilient, enthusiastic, engaged and focused on what we, as adults have deemed appropriate. I have always found it interesting that students are encouraged to participate in prescriptive learning that we, as an institution, have identified as essential for them but, within this constraint, we often fail to consider their own experiences, biases, and limitations. Before conducting my research, my initial observations showed me that what we are doing as a system is not working for students who struggle to engage with material or have social emotional needs extending beyond classroom interventions. My own experiences have taught me that students are often feeling misunderstood or undervalued by the system and, as such, they may be prone to classroom disengagement and school refusal. While a lack of buy-in in current educational goals may lead to partial or complete school refusal, mental health or adverse experiences may exacerbate this disengagement and make investment and participation a challenge. This area of research could be immensely beneficial in identifying themes and informing future practical strategies to support engagement for some of our most vulnerable learners.

To obtain information relative to the research question, the study was designed as a phenomenological case study to deepen my understanding of the experiences of a student who has been avoiding attending his classes (McCaslin & Wilson Scott, 2003). The questions have been informed by the work of Baker and Bishop who discuss the theory behind a phenomenological study where:

the approach allows the researcher to retain a phenomenology's idiographic focus, seeking a sense of the world as felt from within the skin and mind of the individual, whilst producing findings that have potential to be transferable and to inform practice. (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

The interview questions were designed to inspire reflection in the student with the goal of identifying the unique reasons behind their ongoing disengagement.

The Research Question

After careful consideration of current literature on student absences and disengagement, my focused area of research aimed to gain an understanding of the personal stories of a student who is presently struggling to attend their classes while still attending the school building each day. The research sought answers to the question, “What are students perceiving as barriers to attending their classes while still remaining in the school building?” While literature is robust in examining the issues behind both truancy and engagement, little research has been shared regarding the phenomenon of students attending school while avoiding classes. As this issue has been an observable upward trend in many schools within the community, I sought to explore the cause of such a phenomenon; I have been seeking the ‘why’ behind an increasingly common behaviour amongst high school students. Before deciding to formalize my queries, I casually consulted with colleagues regarding their take on this recent behavioural shift and, like me, they were puzzled. While many of us aim to offer theories, draw conclusions, seek research-based solutions, and implement interventions, we have been missing the only true perspective that can aid in deepening our understanding; that of the students. While the students demonstrate this behaviour to us each day, it is them that live these experiences and so I sought the answers to the phenomenon plaguing many educators today; “What brings students to the school each day but prevents them from attending classes?”

Researcher Role/Positionality

My journey in education has been largely without major hurdles; I attended school (as expected), did my homework (as expected) and graduated (as expected), but along the way, I noticed my own experiences were not universal; in fact, my linear path was far from it. I had friends who struggled with academics, friends who struggled at home and friends whose lives were greatly impacted by substance use and challenging socioeconomic experiences. While we walked the same halls and attended the same classes, our experiences were much different; where I succeeded without much struggle, life was just not the same for some. I saw teenagers, kids my own age, persevere and demonstrate more resilience than a child should ever have to. For some students every day was a struggle to keep their heads above water and while some

were drowning, others kept fighting. I was then, and still am, in absolute awe of the things my friends could push through and it is through this lens that I work. While I may not understand or even be aware of the challenges my students are facing, I aim to support them with patience, compassion, and an unwavering genuine curiosity. Like adults, students are faced with challenges on a daily basis and how they respond to adversity is unique to each individual; I believe it is my responsibility to seek to understand what I can do to support students through an empathetic and nonjudgmental lens.

For the past 8 years, I have had the opportunity to work with vulnerable learners and, while this experience has given me a unique perspective, I recognize that this may make it challenging for me to seek school-wide strategies rather than targeted interventions. As I have been a strong advocate for vulnerable learners for several years, my biases may lend toward seeking external factors that explain school avoidance. I recognize the importance that schools have in a systemic sense and so I am aiming to acknowledge my biases to seek practical strategies to intervene. While there are certainly limitations on the support we can offer students, I believe aiming to understand the challenges they are facing is an essential first step in implementing supportive strategies.

Research Site/Participants

The research was conducted within the school in which the participant attends, a mid-sized secondary school in the Lower Mainland of BC, with a diverse socio-economic profile and a large population of students with ministry designations. While the study was initially intended to seek the insight of 5-7 chronically absent students, receiving parental consent proved a critical barrier; 7 students expressed interest in participating but only a single parent consented to the study. Due to this constraint, the research was limited to a single student and therefore became a single-participant case study. While this was not the intended trajectory of the research, this method proved successful in addressing the research question. The interview and questionnaire were conducted in an office space which respected the student's comfort in familiarity and allowed his confidentiality to be honoured.

The student participant was selected based on a non-probability model and as both a convenient and purposive sample; convenience in terms of researcher access to the student and purposive in that the student was selected based on historical behaviours of avoidance, disengagement, and/or absenteeism. The student also represented an extreme case model in that the perspectives of the participant are not the universal experiences of secondary students; the participant demonstrates extreme avoidance and a willingness to access supports and attend school but avoid classes by finding alternate spaces within the building. The information gleaned from this student will provide insight into the stories of the individual to identify themes in the struggles students may be facing.

Participant

The student, a 17-year-old, grade 12 student, has a complicated relationship with school beginning from their early years. When asked to provide a background on their schooling, the student explained that the years were both good and tough and several experiences brought them to where they are today. The student is a highly capable and bright individual who has excelled in some classes and struggled in others. The student, who will henceforth be known as Adam, defines himself as an underachiever and accepts responsibilities for his challenges. Adam has had a complicated past and has struggled with drugs and alcohol for several years. Adam has never found difficulty in the academic aspect of schooling but has struggled to fully engage and participate as many other students do.

Adam is very likeable and has a close friend group who he is loyal to and supports whole-heartedly. Adam is kind, creative and artistic; he is well spoken, and, from an early age, mature and wise beyond his own years. While Adam has the building blocks of a 'good student' he struggles with consistency and engagement in his education even when he is highly interested in the material. Adam's honesty, humility and intelligence have made it easy for teachers to support him and his ability to produce at the right times has brought him to the point of graduation. When asked, Adam explains that his life circumstances, trouble at home, mental health and substance use have all played a role in his challenges with schooling. Interestingly, Adam is a hard worker and is highly successful in his outside work. Adam's intelligence is palatable in

conversation with him as he views the world in a way unique to his own knowledge and experience.

When approached to join the research, Adam was enthusiastic as he felt that other students may benefit from the opportunity to learn from his experiences and he is keen to help identify ways to help other struggling students. Unlike many other chronically avoidant students, Adam's academics have only suffered in terms of performance and not in terms of 'success.' Adam completes his courses, including challenging undertakings but does so in a self-proclaimed, 'half-assed' manner. Adam is the first to acknowledge that his performance would be dramatically better if he were more engaged, even having promised himself he would commit further, but 'things' have gotten in his way. Adam was an ideal candidate for this study as his experiences in education are unique but reflective of a current phenomenon in education: internal truancy. Adam's awareness and innate abilities make his story worth studying as his disengagement and avoidance are a many faceted result of a mosaic of situations and experiences.

Data Collection

The study was idiographic in nature and sought to understand the experiences of the student invited to participate due to meeting inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this study required that the student was aiming to complete high school with a Dogwood Diploma, could frequently be observed avoiding classes and presently accessed in-school supports. The sample was based on a non-probability model and the student was selected as both a convenience and purposive sample. Convenience in terms of researcher access to the student and purposive in that they were selected based on observable, historical behaviours of avoidance, disengagement, and absenteeism. The sample also represents an extreme case model in that the perspectives of the participant are not the typical experiences of all secondary students; the participant selected demonstrates extreme avoidance and a willingness to access supports and attend school but avoid classes by finding alternate spaces within the building.

Data was collected through a qualitative case study facilitated with a semi-structured interview along with an ice-breaker questionnaire. The interview was limited to 20 minutes although an approximated timeframe of 45 minutes was dedicated to the

process. Once the questionnaire was completed, the interview was introduced. The student was reminded of his right to include as little or as much information as he was comfortable sharing and that he may end the interview at any time without judgement or consequence. The interview questions began with Adam reflecting on early experiences at school with the goal of identifying critical turning points in his engagement. While the study aimed to identify the cause behind ongoing internal truancy, the student was encouraged to reflect on his holistic experiences with education.

The interview process was designed to allow Adam to first take time to reflect on his educational journey and then, as the interview progressed, to become more specific about his position on the topic and to potentially offer some insight into how to address the issue of internal truancy. By beginning with a broad, ice-breaker questionnaire, trust was established between myself and Adam before requesting Adam to consider how he views education and asking him to reflect back on where his struggles may have begun, following funnel-like process from broad to focused (Brenner, 2006).

The interview questions were created to identify potential causes for absenteeism through the lens of the student and simultaneously empowering Adam to share his narrative throughout the process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The phrasing and language used in the questioning were chosen to alleviate potential barriers such as complicated diction, educational jargon and other language which could confuse the participants or perpetuate disengagement. Modelled by the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, questions were designed to allow me to capture Adam's own unique, lived experiences and to gain a rich account of Adam's perspectives on his educational journey (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Based on prevalent research in the area of student disengagement and numerous causal factors such as mental health, substance use and socioeconomic challenges, the questions here were created to identify factors outside of the already well-established precursors to disengagement. By identifying where student voice was missing, the interview questions aimed to answer the research question through student experience rather than external factors. Literature exploring absenteeism informed the interview questions by first identifying early childhood experiences with education and then moving into current experiences to allow Adam and myself to follow his educational journey. The initial questionnaire intended to introduce Adam to the discussion and to allow him to begin to reflect on his own educational experiences. (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gase et al., 2016;

Kljakovic et al., 2021). The number of questions, while few, had been chosen to increase willingness to engage with the research rather than overwhelming the student (Baker & Bishop, 2015). The ice-breaker questionnaire was not recorded as its intention was to build confidence but once the interview commenced an audio-only recording began with Adam's consent. While Adam described his experiences, field notes were taken to ensure that both verbal and non-verbal responses were recorded. The purpose of the two-fold recording method was to allow for non-verbal communication to be noted alongside participant answers and to supplement answers as needed. As the interview was evolving and the method of analysis inductive, changes were expected throughout the interview with Adam and adjustments were made throughout.

Data Analysis

The interview was recorded using Zoom meetings which provided a preliminary transcript of the interview. In order to check for accuracy, the transcript was cross referenced with the audio recording making note of any variances. Once initial changes were made due to mis-transcription, the transcript was cross referenced again to ensure that the responses were accurately recorded. In conjunction with the audio recording and transcription, field notes were taken to ensure that any notable changes in body language or non-verbal cues could be accounted for as they may not be otherwise noted. After transcripts were verified against audio recordings and field notes, the interview responses were created and reviewed to assess appropriate code labels (DeCarlo, et al., 2022). The purpose of this inductive strategy was to ensure that information is analyzed as it is given rather than being reconstructed to fit into pre-established codes. (Baker & Bishop, 2015).

Once reliable transcripts and field notes had been taken, the analytical process began. Raw data was analyzed following a four-step process as informed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009):

1. Reading and re-reading the transcript
2. Taking exploratory notes and assigning preliminary codes
3. Identifying themes

4. Making connections between themes

Beginning with an additional, analytical reading of the transcript, notes were taken to identify potential themes in the responses. Further to identifying themes, the transcripts were further annotated to identify pieces of the narrative Adam was sharing while participating in the interview. Through an inductive analytical process, initial codes were identified and then later classified into larger themes. Using an inductive open coding analysis, emergent themes were identified through Adam's responses to the questions (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Once all responses were analyzed, the codes were placed into categories such as 'intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, consequence' etc. Categories were then further analyzed and compiled into narrower themes. The process was organized into a table for organizational and analytical purposes as follows:

Table 1. Example of coding and thematic analysis

Segment	Line number(s)	Initial Code	Theme
threatened to suspend me	99	Consequences	Consistency
I wanted to try harder	65-65	Internal struggle	Power
They don't notice how problems change	200-201	Adaptation	Visibility

Once the process was complete, the information taken from each step was compiled as an informed narrative regarding Adam's experiences in schools and his perspectives about ongoing internal truancy. To ensure that Adam's story was honored, and his experiences were told as he intended, the analysis was conducted based upon Adam's responses rather than inferences made by the researcher. As Smith and Osborn (2003) assert:

[w]hile one is attempting to capture and do justice to the meanings of the respondents to learn about their mental and social world, those meanings are not transparently available – they must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation. (p. 66)

Once the data had been organized into themes, the findings were clear, and Adam's narrative was able to be constructed.

Findings

Initial data analysis gleaned from the interview transcription contained recurrent themes of various forms of student discomfort. Adam was forthcoming in his depiction of his ongoing struggle to attend his classes but was indirect regarding his reasons for this disengagement suggesting that his avoidance was not a conscious decision, but rather, a reactionary practice that he sustained throughout his high school education. Themes discovered throughout the transcript indicated that Adam felt his class avoidance was counterproductive, but he realized that he often felt compelled to wander due to several factors which varied from day to day. Adam's narrative is rich in detail and contains information essential to understanding internal truancy and curating effective strategies to support chronically disengaged students. While participating in the interview process, Adam's responses were coded with a vast variety of descriptors but, when viewed as a story of his educational journey through the lens of an IPA strategy, three key themes were identified: visibility, power/powerlessness, and consistency.

Visibility

From the outset of the interview, Adam's responses to reflective questions indicated strong feelings toward his initial elementary school experiences, he explained that although his experiences were generally "very positive", external familial struggles impacted his behaviour; "[g]ot a lot of stuff going on at home, so I had a lot of behavioural issues, a lot of trouble regulating my anger and emotions." Here Adam explains how external forces impacted his ability to participate in school as expected and therefore lead to internal struggles with following rules and expectations. Adam's reflection on his elementary experiences first highlighted the theme of visibility in that Adam struggled to be seen and understood in both the home and at school. Adam explained that from these experiences, he continued to struggle: "[I had] anxiety, hard times talking to people and sometimes got pretty depressed." This recollection highlighted Adam's ongoing struggle with visibility as he often felt misunderstood or not seen in school.

As Adam shared his narrative, he often made reference to the perceptions people hold of him and how he feels about these misconceptions. When Adam was

asked about the generalizations people may make about his efforts or lack thereof, he responded, “I mean, I don’t blame them.” Adam indicated that the way people see him is an expected byproduct of his behaviour and that his sustained avoidance likely has people viewing him in a certain way; he explained that his actions and responses fueled these misconceptions: “[n]ever in class, and then my overall attitude. I can’t really be bothered by much. I can see why they would think that.” Adam’s acceptance of these views others may hold of him support the assertion that Adam has struggled with being seen and understood by the education system for an extended period of time. Adam discussed how being understood by teachers has helped support his desire to reach expectations and that in-school supports (counseling etc.) are effective but these interventions require educational staff to understand him. Adam explained:

I think, asking, ‘hey, what’s up? what are you doing? You know that’s obviously fine. You know, teachers should do that. But I found, whenever they became mean about it, or like went after you excessively, just made me want to be like, fuck you, now I’m gonna do this more.

Adam’s response to this common type of approach indicates the importance of students being visible to staff; that they must be understood, respected, and valued as individuals rather than as subjects. Adam’s response here also shows his appreciation for a genuine interest from staff and that a direct, authoritative approach is ineffective and may have adverse outcomes. Adam also discussed how it is important for teachers to understand the challenges of youth today to be able to connect with them: “they don’t necessarily notice how problems change necessarily... so sometimes that can be a little bit of a issue.” Adam’s insights into strategies currently utilized by some educators leave space for a revamp in our interventional tool kit; our first-response strategies need to be further developed. A guideline for supporting the re-engagement of youth who are chronically avoidant needs to begin with students becoming truly visible to educators by aiming to understand them and, as Adam explained, this could lead to improved student response to interventions.

Consistency

A second theme identified through the interview with Adam was the consistency and the lack of consistency in many realms of the education system. Adam discussed his own challenges in transitioning from elementary to secondary and noted how the major

changes made it difficult to fit into the system. When reflecting on his elementary experience he described it as “rigid” and explained that secondary, in contrast offered “pretty much all the freedom I could really ever want.” Adam discussed that this lack of consistency was overwhelming and that “with a lot of people being here and me, ok, anxiety, hard time talking to people, sometimes got pretty depressed. So beginning high school wasn’t very great.” This challenge with a lack of consistency between his educational experiences led to him becoming overwhelmed. Adam’s predisposition to anxiety and depression made him seek ways to avoid overstimulating environments which made engaging difficult. Adam asserted, “some days I get stuck in my own head. Kinda spaced out. So so I can’t really focus. So I tend to walk around and get out of it the best I can.” Adam’s feeling of a lack of transitional consistency led him to find coping strategies that perpetuated his challenges and led to avoidant behaviours.

Further concerns with consistency addressed by Adam are the responses of educators in terms of consequences for behaviour. Adam recounted several strategies that were initially implemented but later abandoned explaining that the lack of follow through made the threat of consequence ineffective for him. Adam discussed specific past strategies used to mitigate absences in students and, interestingly, explained how limited follow through and abandonment of said strategies made him less likely to adhere to expectations. Adam discussed that the most common strategy, that of suspension for excessive skipping was an ineffective measure. When asked if he deemed these responses effective, he responded with “they’re not for me, which is kind of a stupid punishment, but I mean the threat of getting in trouble might make some people attend more.” This response indicates Adam’s position that this approach may be effective for some, but that students must be motivated by this overt display of authority. While he asserted that this response is the norm and is to be expected from teachers, he explained that this did not motivate him to make changes and, in fact, when asked if this impacted his choices, he responded with an assured “absolutely fucking not.” Here Adam touches again on a need for consistent response to absence to ensure that all students can expect what the intervention strategies will be for avoiding classes. Adam even explains that his own response to these strategies was inconsistent; when asked if his attendance has gotten better, he responded with “up and down.” While he did not offer a suggestion, his responses alluded to a need for more consistency in response to avoidance and general behaviour; his discussion of previously implemented and then

abandoned strategies demonstrated an acknowledgement of effort but that unsustained interventions made changing seem immaterial. Adam's narrative highlights the necessity for consistency in many areas of education from successful integrations, transitions and, perhaps most importantly, consequences.

Power/Powerlessness

The final overarching theme regarding the causes for internal truancy noted in Adam's interview was that of power and powerlessness. While the theme may not be initially understood as being related to educational practices and engagement, Adam's insights denoted the dichotomy between the feelings of possessing control over an educational experience and the contrasting participation in a prescribed system. While it may be the most complex theme identified, the theme of power and powerlessness encompasses each theme identified throughout the interview. When finalizing the findings, codes categorized in the present theme included motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic), expectations, influence, and individuality. While its complexity requires careful consideration regarding the analysis of the finding, its inclusion is essential in aiming to understand causal factors behind internal truancy.

During the interview Adam alluded to his motivation or lack of motivation throughout his educational journey. Adam described his early experiences as generally positive but, when peer relations became challenging, he was motivated to lash out and reclaim power over his emotions and actions. Motivation continued to be a factor in Adam's struggle for power in his education when he explained that inconsistent internal motivation made attending classes challenging as he "wanted to try harder in the class and stress. Could never find the motivation." Adam's struggle for motivational power continued as he felt compelled to attend school due to external motivational factors of parental influence and societal expectations. When asked what gets him to school on days he isn't feeling up to it, Adam responded "[m]y parents would lose their fucking minds." Although he felt compelled to attend school each day due to the reaction of his family (external motivators), he indicated that in some ways he has retained power over his education. Adam explained that even if his parents did not force him to attend, he would. His reason for this, teeters between an intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factor as he stated, "I want to graduate but if a high school education was not so important now, probably not." While on the surface this may show that Adam has made the choice to

continue to attend school, his reasoning behind his decision indicates that societal expectations compels him to continue which indicates a fine balance between power and powerlessness. Adam's response indicated that influences both inside and outside of himself are inadvertently motivating him continuing to attend, that societal expectations of graduation weigh heavily upon his decision to carry on. This assertion is essential to examine as it illustrates the desire students may have to be successful even when their behaviour suggests otherwise.

When concluding the interview, Adam was asked about potential recommendations for educators to help students want to get back to classes and to help mitigate the issue of internal truancy. Adam offered compelling insight into ways to shift the power back to student; he explained that "[school] is too ridged, and not open in the area it should be, and in other areas there isn't enough structure." He continued:

You know European schools where you select kind of what you're interested in and they cater to that specifically for every individual, right? That sort of education system, in my opinion, would probably solve a lot of the problems people have while attending school.

The theme of power and powerlessness is highlighted in Adam's recommendation to emulate a type of educational system where students have full agency over what they engage with. This insight shows the need for students to feel empowered with choice and direction, where they have the opportunity to be consistently visible as individuals and understood as such.

Discussion

While some of the data was anticipated, much of the interview with Adam provided new and surprising insight. Adam's verbal responses to the questions were enlightening but his nonverbal communication also provided valuable context. When asked about extrinsic motivating factors, Adam was brief in his answers and showed visible discomfort by shifting in his chair and becoming fidgety. In contrast, when responding to inquiries regarding the in-school causality for absence, he became assertive in his answers and spoke assuredly. While the discussion of teacher response, consequence and parental influence were expected yet informative, surprising insight came from his discussion of the challenges he had when transitioning from elementary school to high school and how the inconsistency he felt impacted his ability to engage. Adam

explained that his experience in elementary was generally positive but then recounted that he was also picked on, these seemingly contradictory statements are indicative of his reflective process while answering the questions. Adam discussed peer relations being complicated in elementary and positive in high school, yet he also asserted that peers were a contributing factor to his class avoidance. While his direct answer indicated that his need to wander is driven by a multitude of factors ranging from emotions, anxiety, depression and general boredom, Adam's powerful and truly actionable responses came in a both direct and implied fashion; the experiences he felt and the shift from elementary school impacted him dramatically.

Beyond providing answers to the interview questions, Adam offered suggestions on how to proactively work against internal truancy; he explained that addressing the issue of engagement and absence as early as grade one or two would be helpful in setting students up for success. Adam mentioned that varied teaching styles, approaches and intentional kindness would help students want to be present and that consistency in both action and reaction would inspire students to want to make change. Although Adam's input was seemingly varied, his insight was invaluable as he addressed major themes of visibility, consistency, and power/powerlessness and he aimed to explain his position in terms of how schools are making engagement challenging for students. While it was expected that factors such as mental health and substance use would be major themes in the research, they played minor supporting roles in the valuable information gained.

Limitations

While the study proved to be enlightening as it provided insight into a phenomenon that hasn't been thoroughly explored, limitations such as participant sample size produced a single-case study analysis of a broader issue in education. A larger sample size would have given breadth to the findings and provided a richer data pool. In attempting to conduct the research with a sample of upwards of 7 students, getting parental consent as well as student follow through was limiting. While several students expressed interest in participating, only a single student contributed his experiences to the study. Although this limitation changed the scope of the research, the information gleaned from the single student case study offers much to build upon and future areas for further research.

Conclusion

Before commencing the project, I was struck by the increased perceived apathy from students in various pockets of the school building. Initially, I was keen to discover research-based interventions to support the students I work with, and I later discovered that there was a wide gap in my search. Where I sought actionable interventions, I struggled to find case studies and scenarios much like the situations teachers are currently observing. Prior to initiating this research, internal truancy was a term and idea I stumbled across searching for relevant information regarding attendance and disengagement. While in the beginning this idea was just that, a term used colloquially to describe the phenomenon of attending school while avoiding classes but, since engaging in this research, I have now come across documents from some American private school districts addressing this same phenomenon. While my findings were limited in scope, the issue appears to be gaining traction in a variety of communities; this phenomenon is not limited to culture, socioeconomic standing or geographical demographics, this is an issue reaching children and teachers in vast areas of education.

Through a semi-structured interview, Adam's insights aided in answering my question regarding the reasons behind internal truancy and what is keeping students at school but drawing them away from their classes. Adam's story was inspiring as he took me with him on his educational journey and allowed me access to his story. Adam drew upon personal experiences and upon analyzing the interview, he provided three key themes that require further consideration to begin to address internal truancy: visibility, consistency, and power/powerlessness. While a direct answer to my research question was not explicitly reached, many opportunities for functional change were addressed. As explained in existing literature on chronic absence and disengagement, students are requiring support and imminent changes in educational approaches are critical. Numerous factors are weighing heavily on many students and there is much room for improvement in current intervention strategies.

In order to address the issues brought forward by Adam, small yet impactful changes need to be made in the way educators are attempting to engage students. By increasing the desire to see students as individuals; to increase their visibility, educators

may be able to learn how to best support and re-engage them. Adam's discussion of the inconsistency in expectations and responses to behaviour is insight that cannot be ignored; students are seeking predictable, compassionate and empowering responses from educators. Further research into the efficacy of re-engagement through empowering students through choice and personal agency may allow students to regain the power they seek over their own education. Students like Adam are not few and far between. While Adam's story is unique and his experiences may not reflect the narrative of most students, the interventions and changes his story highlights would benefit all members of school communities. Students who are truly visible, find consistency in their educational experiences and feel as they have power over their education may engage or re-engage more meaningfully than the status quo. While the answers are not concrete, the information learned from this study will provide insight into next steps for future research or tools to inform future supports and strategies. Students, all students, deserve an education that values them and, Adam's contribution to the study on internal truancy may be a crucial first step in working toward a change in practice and policy in how all students are engaged.

References

- Arthur, A., & Hannah, E. (2015). Perspectives of Older Adolescents on Intellectual Engagement and Re-connecting with Secondary School. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 16(2), 42–69. <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v16i2.21>
- Baker, M., & Bishop, F. L. (2015). Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31(4), 354–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2015.1065473>
- Birioukov, A. (2021). Absent on Absenteeism: Academic Silence on Student Absenteeism in Canadian Education. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de L'éducation*, 44(3), 718–731. <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.v44i3.4663>
- Birioukov-Brant, A., & Brant-Birioukov, K. (2019). Policy With an Asterisk: Understanding How Staff in Alternative School Settings Negotiate a Mandatory Attendance Policy to Meet the Needs of Their Students. *Frontiers in Education*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00144>
- Brenner, M. E. (2006). Interviewing in Educational Research. In J.L. Green, G. Camilli & P.B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. (pp. 357-371). Routledge. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.4324/9780203874769>
- Burton, B. (2011). Peer teaching as a strategy for conflict management and student reengagement in schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-011-0046-4>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X019005002>
- DeCarlo, M., Cummings, C., Agnelli, K., & Laitsch, D. (2022, June 28). Graduate research methods in education (leadership): A project-based approach (Version 2.12.14.17-19.22). BC Campus. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dlaitsch/>
- Duncan, M. J., Patte, K. A., & Leatherdale, S. T. (2021). Mental Health Associations with Academic Performance and Education Behaviors in Canadian Secondary School Students. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 36(4), 082957352199731. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573521997311>
- Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. (2015). A revised inventory of Adverse Childhood Experiences. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 48, 13–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.07.011>

- Finning, K., Ukoumunne, O. C., Ford, T., Danielson-Waters, E., Shaw, L., Romero De Jager, I., Stentiford, L., & Moore, D. A. (2019). Review: The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school - a systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 24*(3), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12322>
- Gase, L. N., DeFosset, A., Perry, R., & Kuo, T. (2016). Youths' perspectives on the reasons underlying school truancy and opportunities to improve school attendance. *The Qualitative Report, 21*(2), 299-320. <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss2/8>
- Gubbels, J., van der Put, C. E., & Assink, M. (2019). Risk Factors for School Absenteeism and Dropout: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 48*(9), 1637–1667. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01072-5>
- Hendron, M., & Kearney, C. A. (2016). School Climate and Student Absenteeism and Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems. *Children & Schools, 38*(2), 109–116. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw009>
- Hughes, E. K., Gullone, E., Dudley, A., & Tonge, B. (2009). A Case-Control Study of Emotion Regulation and School Refusal in Children and Adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 30*(5), 691–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431609341049>
- Kljakovic, M., Kelly, A., & Richardson, A. (2021). School refusal and isolation: The perspectives of five adolescent school refusers in London, UK. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 26*(4), 1089–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045211025782>
- Lawless, B. & Chen, Y. (2019) Developing a Method of Critical Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Communication Inquiry, *Howard Journal of Communications, 30*:1, 92-106, DOI: 10.1080/10646175.2018.1439423
- Lincoln, S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage.
- McCaslin, M. L., & Scott, K. W. (2003). The Five-Question Method For Framing A Qualitative Research Study. *The Qualitative Report, 8*(3), 447-461. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1880>
- Pas, E. T., Bradshaw, C. P., & Mitchell, M. M. (2011). Examining the validity of office discipline referrals as an indicator of student behavior problems. *Psychology in the Schools, 48*(6), 541–555. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20577>
- Pas, E. T., Cash, A. H., O'Brennan, L., Debnam, K. J., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2015). Profiles of classroom behavior in high schools: Associations with teacher behavior management strategies and classroom composition. *Journal of School Psychology, 53*, 137–148. ScienceDirect.

- Pinkelman, S. E., McIntosh, K., Rasplica, C. K., Berg, T., & Strickland-Cohen, M. K. (2015). Perceived Enablers and Barriers Related to Sustainability of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. *Behavioral Disorders, 40*(3), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.17988/0198-7429-40.3.171>
- Smith, L., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Sage. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3013473/interpretative-phenomenological-analysis-theory-method-and-research-pdf>
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51–80). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sobba, K. N. (2018). Correlates and buffers of school avoidance: a review of school avoidance literature and applying social capital as a potential safeguard. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 24*(3), 380–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1524772>
- Webb, N. J., Miller, T. L., & Stockbridge, E. L. (2022). Potential effects of adverse childhood experiences on school engagement in youth: a dominance analysis. *BMC Public Health, 22*(1), 1–2096. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14524-8>
- Williams, G. C., Patte, K. A., Ferro, M. A., & Leatherdale, S. T. (2021). Substance use classes and symptoms of anxiety and depression among Canadian secondary school students. *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada, 41*(5).

Appendix A. Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Study Number: 30001692

Version date: 4 May, 2023

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the study. Your participation is incredibly valuable in helping to understand how the education system can support students who struggle to attend classes. **As a reminder, your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without judgement or consequence.**

Please answer the following questions by circling the best answer:

1. I find value in education *Always* *Sometimes*
Never
2. I feel valued by staff at school *Always* *Sometimes*
Never
3. School is a positive environment for me *Always* *Sometimes*
Never
4. I feel connection to some of my peers *Always* *Sometimes*
Never
5. There is at least one adult who I can go to when I am feeling overwhelmed.
Yes No Unsure
6. There are things that can be done in the school that would make me want to attend more often.
Yes No Unsure
7. If possible, please explain what could be done to help you attend school more often. Please feel free to answer in point form.

Appendix B. Interview Protocol

Study Number: 30001692
Version date: 4 May, 2023

Here, there, and everywhere: A phenomenological case study exploring barriers to class attendance

Interview Questions

The following questions will be asked of the participants verbally. If required, participants are welcome to have a copy of the questions to assist in comprehension. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to stop the questions or withdraw from the study at any time without judgement or consequence.

Questions will be asked in a casual manner to assist the participants in building comfort and confidence. Participants will be welcome to add additional information or pass on any question at any time.

1. What were your first initial experiences at school?
2. Did you feel different when you transitioned to secondary?
3. Why do you think it is hard for you to attend your classes?
4. What has been your experience with school and other supports?
5. What do you think the school system thinks about attendance?
6. Have you ever had any consequences or punishments due to your attendance?
7. Did you feel motivated to make changes?
8. Do you feel like you have any control over your education?
9. Where do you feel most comfortable spending your time during the school day? Why?
10. What helps you make it through the door of the school when you are not feeling up to it?
11. Are there things that you would change about the way the education system works?
12. If you could change something about how people try to help you make it to class, what would it be?
13. Is there anything that you would like educators to know?