Exploring Parents' Perceptions of Student Absenteeism in K-3

by

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Ethics Statement

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Abstract

Chronic absenteeism affects students' academic achievement as well as their social and emotional wellbeing. In early elementary school, the primary responsibility for school attendance rests with parents and guardians. This thesis investigates parents' perceptions of factors related to school attendance. The study was conducted in BC's largest school district within the context of an absenteeism reduction program. Fifty-four parents of students in K-3 from 15 inner-city schools participated in individual interviews that explored their views on the links between the purpose of school, attendance, and academic achievement. While most parents' perceptions were that attendance is important providing social and academic value, several noted that they kept their child at home to bond with a parent or to support their children's mental health. The results point to a complex and nuanced relationship among factors linked to school attendance, such as individual child and parent characteristics, transportation, food security, and after-school programs.

Keywords: Absenteeism; Chronic absenteeism; School attendance; Truancy; Elementary School; Parents perceptions;

For Eliot, my partner in crime, my best friend, whose unconditional love, undying support and true generosity of heart gives me roots and wings daily.

For Zachary and Lydia whose gifts of smiles and love bring me true joy every day. Parenting you has given me a mirror into myself and an optimistic lens through which to view the world. I strive to make this world a better place for you.

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With sincere gratitude.

Margarita Karpilovski

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List of Abbreviations

C-SP	Community-Schools Partnership
SD 36	Surrey School District
AM	Attendance Matters

Glossary

Chronic Absenteeism	Following Cheng and Romero's (2008) work, chronic absenteeism in this study is defined as students missing more that 10% of school in a given month or year. This includes excused and unexcused absences.
Attendance Matters (AM)	Attendance Matters is a school district absenteeism reduction program in which outreach staff support a caseload of grades K-3 students who are chronically absent. These students are identified by their previous academic year's attendance rates.
Truancy	Truancy is a term used to describe a pattern of missed school days. Traditionally, this number only counts the number of unexcused absences (AttendanceWorks.org, retrieved on February 7, 2017).
Community-Schools Partnership	A Surrey School District department whose mandate is to support vulnerable students through enriching expanded learning opportunities outside of instructional times.
Outreach Worker	Front line Community-Schools Partnership staff who work to support students through a variety of programs.
Early Elementary	This term specifically refers to students in kindergarten through grade 3.
Vulnerable Students	Vulnerable students is a term used by the District and is defined as children, youth and their families who may be vulnerable due to life circumstances or challenges.
Inner City School	Inner City is a District designation that takes into consideration factors such as home ownership, transiency, family composition in determining vulnerability and needed supports
School District (The District, SD 36)	This refers to the Surrey School District, a large urban district located in British Columbia, Canada.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

This thesis addresses the issue of school attendance by students in early elementary school. This is delimited to schools with an absenteeism intervention program and housed within a large school district in British Columbia, Canada. This first chapter provides an overview of the thesis by first outlining the background to the study, specifying the problem of the study, its' significance, and its' purpose.

To begin, I would like to situate myself the context of conducting this study. I am a daughter, a parent and a parenting partner. Tensions about school attendance were prevalent in my upbringing as my parents struggled with the decision to take me out of school for the purpose of trips and vacation. On one instance, I recall my mother planning an upcoming trip with her friend. As they were discussing the trip's schedule, my mother asked, "and what will be of school?" Even then, I recall sensing the tension she felt between placing high value on schooling as well as on high impact family experiences. Now with my own children, my partner and I often discuss benefits and costs of keeping our son out of school for one reason or another. As a parent, I often struggle with my decision not to send my child to school, when personal or family affairs make this convenient. Balancing child's wellbeing, both academic and social, is my priority which often interferes with my understanding of compulsory attendance.

As an educational professional -at the time of doing this research, I was employed as a program facilitator of Attendance Matters program in the Surrey School District. Attendance Matters was a program its infancy trying to reduce chronic absenteeism in highly vulnerable schools. Attendance Matters was designed as a targeted intervention for chronically absent students. The program consists of three main parts: breakfast club, literacy enrichment, and case management which are described in detail in chapter 3. As I was supporting a large staff of front line workers tasked with supporting children and their families struggling with chronic absenteeism I was struck by the apparent inefficiency of some our strategies. Initially these came in the form of challenges and frustrations brought to me by the outreach workers. However it became apparent that we were seeing parents as transportation facilitators in their role regarding

their child's attendance. I began to wonder what role parent's assumptions, beliefs, and lived experience in supporting attendance had.

As a facilitator of the program who felt outreach workers' frustrations about interventions that weren't working and families that were not making progress, I began to appreciate the complexity of the issue. As a professional working within the school system, I began to see firsthand the intersection of absenteeism with other indicators of school disengagement, such as lack of social and peer connections, falling behind academically, and behavioural and emotional challenges. Additionally, I began to see the interplay between absenteeism and parental backgrounds, including socio-economic factors such as poverty, recent immigration, and cultural barriers.

At the district, I noticed that majority of funds allocated for special programs were intended for intervention. Perhaps it is due to the harsh realities of funding insufficiencies, but there seems to be a real reluctance in the district to support prevention programs, to the exception of the work of the Community-Schools Partnership department.

It is important to note that there are multiple conversations happening at the district level as to where the issue of absenteeism truly belongs – be it in Education Services under the tiers of support system, on an individual basis, or with community-schools, addressing the issue for targeted populations. In fact, this debate really speaks to how the issue is addressed in the literature whereby some scholars consider absenteeism as an individualistic challenge, while others see it as a family-wide, school wide, neighbourhood wide issue.

My experiences from the field resonate with what has been well documented in the literature over the preceding 10 years, gaining prominence with a series of studies by Gottfried (2009, 2011). Gottfried documented the negative impacts of chronic absenteeism breaking down the impacts into reduction in achievement in mathematics and reading, decreases in educational and social engagement, and poorer social and emotional well-being.

The issue of chronic absenteeism (discussed in detail in chapter 2) has a significant and large impact on individual students' educational trajectory as well as on whole school systems. Students who do not attend school regularly remain unable to

benefit from what schools offer academically and socially. For students who are at-risk due to life circumstances, schools play several roles aside from being an education institution. For many, it is a place where they do not only acquire skills, but also access supports, develop positive relationships and often have their basic needs met such as shelter, food and clothing. Provincial dollars such as community link funding are spent on programs to support especially vulnerable students. And, district resources are allocated to developing structures of support and services to address the needs of special demographic populations. This includes, but is not limited to, students with special needs, Aboriginal students, and refugees and children living under the poverty line all of whom often become chronically absent. Student absenteeism negatively impacts the potential success of such programs when students are not able to benefit from the programs specifically designed to help them (e.g., Chang & Romero, 2008).

Recently the focus on student absenteeism has been put on the early years. Chang and Romero (2008) state that in the first years of school chronic absenteeism (or missing over 10% of the school year) are associated with low academic performance in subsequent grades. Nauer and Yereni (2008) further suggest that chronic absenteeism in the early grades is a strong predictor for dropping out. Additionally, student absences not only yield negative impacts for the absent child, but on her peers as well (Gottfried, 2011)

Primary education is an important part of the development of the intellectual, social, and human capital necessary for the sustainability of contemporary societies. In cases where students are persistently absent from the educational process, the consequences are profound. Inconsistent attendance patterns in primary school tend to lead to increased propensity for secondary school attrition; as such, the years spent in the primary grades are especially important to a student's long-term success (Nauer, White & Yerneni, 2008). Lehr, Sinclair, and Christenson (2009) note that "[S]tudents who are at risk of dropping out of school can be identified retrospectively as early as third grade on the basis of attendance patterns, academic performance, and behaviour" (p. 279). Chang and Romero (2008) urged districts to mind the attendance gap, suggesting that "going to school regularly in the early years was especially critical for children living in poverty" (P.3). Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicted the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of 5th grade."

The decision on school attendance in the early years falls on the parents of children. Parental understandings, perceptions and biases inform their decisions and play a significant role in student absenteeism.

Student absenteeism in the early years is quite different from issues of school refusal and truancy, both of which describe different types of non-attendance associated with secondary school. One of the main differences lies in the heavy impact of parental influence on students' attendance in early elementary school. The district wide initiative to support student attendance in the early grades described earlier has brought the question of parental roles in school attendance to the forefront

In cases of high absenteeism, there are multiple viewpoints to potential barriers to healthy attendance in relation to parental participation in the process. These include poverty, physical and mental health, transiency, cultural barriers, trauma, single-parent households, transportation and many others. For example, on the issue of transportation, there is no school bus service for all children at the district and families are expected to facilitate their children's transportation to and from the school. This can pose significant barriers to families and can cause a child to become chronically absent. Despite chronic absenteeism being a wide spread issue, there is little understanding among school administration and staff of the role that parents play in child attendance and, more importantly, of ways in which schools can support parents.

Factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism are varied and range from psychological, physiological, social, economic, to emotional. Absenteeism is often not a culprit but a consequence of other life circumstances circumstantial and generational, current and historical. Chang and Romero (2008) noticed that when children struggle with attendance in the early grades it is often due to a complex interplay of factors that include familial and community challenges. This problem is widespread across the district and is not limited by geographical constraints. However, the impact of chronic absenteeism on students in school is more severe when it is concentrated in highly vulnerable schools and neighbourhoods (Chang and Romero, 2008).

Without a clear understanding of parental barriers that contribute to absenteeism, very little can be accomplished in improving student attendance and by way academic and social success. In a societal structure that sees schools as mechanisms of

opportunity equalizers, absenteeism remains a significant barrier for disadvantaged students to catch up to their middle-class counterparts. Stakeholders concerned with this issue include districts, schools, parents, community members and students. Since absenteeism not only impacts the absent child but their classmates and school, it is within the best interests of all to ensure a systematized approach toward a solution.

Chronic absenteeism is a highly prevalent occurrence in schools across the district and the country. In Surrey, the largest school district in British Columbia, over 50% of elementary schools have more than 10% of their school population classified as chronically absent. Some with as many as 25% of their student body chronically absent on a daily basis (School District #36, 2015). Students who are often absent are more likely to fall behind requiring teachers to repeat material. Student absenteeism also negatively impacts group work and social structure in classrooms (Gottfried, 2011). High prevalence of students requiring support who miss school often cause districts and schools budgetary inefficiencies. District administrators, principals, teachers and students are impacted by the issues of chronic absenteeism as it has significant impacts on the education system as a whole, from budgetary allocations, all the way to student experiences in classrooms. Further, ignoring the issue of chronic absenteeism could lead to missed opportunities for supporting populations that need it the most. Often this misunderstood phenomenon can lead to students being blamed and shamed for circumstances they have little control over, which can in turn cause resentment, dissonance, or disconnection.

Absenteeism is not a phenomenon isolated to elementary schools. Secondary schools as well as post secondary institutions face issues of student absenteeism. Identification and intervention on the problem in the early years would yield two benefits: it would sustain improved educational and social trajectories for students and create positive and internalized habits and long term sustained resilience.

Parent engagement has been a deep seeded issue in education and much research has been done on ways of improving school-parent relationships in an effort to improve student achievement outcomes. The context of student absenteeism presents a focused perspective for a renewed view on this larger issue. In this context, parent engagement is taken as a way of mitigating attendance patterns linked with negative educational outcomes. Current research focuses on student factors that contribute to

outcomes that result from chronic absenteeism (For example, Kearney 2008). However, there is little research that focuses on parental factors and behaviours that both contribute and mitigate student absenteeism.

The purpose of the study is to explore the role parents play in supporting healthy student attendance in early elementary years. Specifically, the aim of the study is to explore parents' perceptions about the purpose of schooling, and chronic absenteeism. To understand this phenomenon, data were collected from parents at the 15 schools who implemented the Attendance Matters program in Surrey School District between 2011-2014.

The following chapters are organized as follows: In chapter 2, I review relevant literature to the topic of absenteeism and parental involvement. Chapter 3 provides details about the methodology of the study, including participant selection, data collection instrument used and the method of data analysis. In chapter 4, I present the findings of the study organized by research questions, and finally in chapter 5, I discuss the relevance of the findings, contributions of the study to the literature, practice and policy, as well as present considerations for future research.

Chapter 2.

Relevant Literature on Absenteeism

2.1. Introduction

Currently in Canada and the USA, up to 20% of students have chronic rates of absenteeism, which has a detrimental impact on students' academic, and social outcomes as well as on their peers (Gottfried, 2009, 2011, 2014; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Chronic absenteeism is defined as more than 10% absenteeism over a school year and is linked to negative outcomes at different levels of a child's educational career (Chang & Romero 2008). At the primary level, chronic absenteeism is linked to gradual loss of school readiness over the first 3 years of school, poor literacy and numeracy skills (Lehr, Sinclair, Christenson, 2004); at late elementary and early high school, chronic absenteeism is linked with substance use and delinquent behaviour (Hallfors, Vevea & Iritani, 2002); and in late high school, chronic absenteeism is linked with dropout rates (Kearney, 2008).

When children struggle with attendance in the early grades it is often due to a complex interplay of factors that include familial and community challenges (Chang & Romero, 2008). Reid (2005) argues that the multitude of factors that influence absence from school include: "parental attitudes to education; holidays taken during term-time; familial and home background issues; transportation difficulties" (p. 200). These factors are intertwined and often cannot be considered isolation.

The impact of school absences can be felt on many levels. For example, Vernez, Krop, and Rydell (1999) found that for each student who drops out of school, the cost to the government in social welfare subsidies and support far outweighs the preventative investments. Not surprisingly, at the primary school level, student absences have been found to have a negative impact on the overall academic achievement of entire schools. Recently, Gottfried (2011) found that not only did student absences have a significant negative effect on the absent students and schools, but they also had a negative effect on peers. As a result of these findings, Gottfried calls for more research examining attendance in the early primary school years and also advocates for a more

sophisticated understanding of the various definitions of school non-participation, or absences. My study responds to this call.

It is interesting to note that absenteeism has been researched in a variety of disciplines and from a variety of perspectives. In this review of the literature I attend to research from the fields of education, sociology, medicine and others, showing the large number of fields and professionals concerned with the issue.

The organization of this chapter is inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model framework as used by Sugrue, Zuel and LaLiberte (2016) and Chatwin (2012). In this model, an individual is placed in the centre, and concentric circles describe various factors that affect the individual, where the distance to the centre metaphorically points to how close a given system is to the individual (see Figure 1). Using a typological metaphor that describes the distance to an individual (student in this case), absenteeism is situated within the systems that interact with and affect the student.
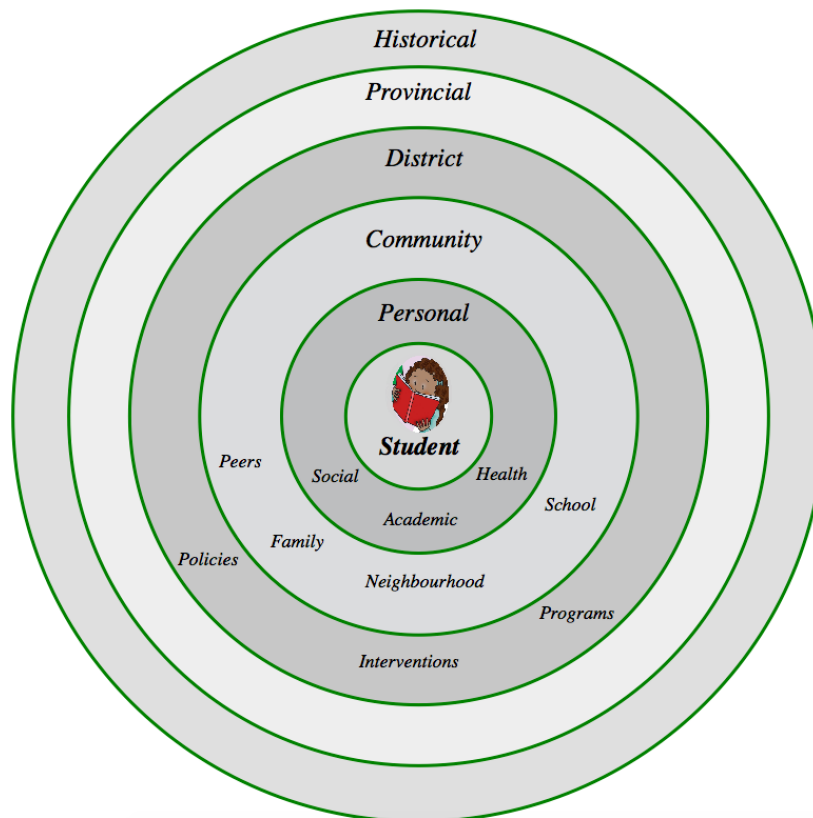
Figure 2.1: **Schematic organization of the literature review**

In this review of literature, considering factors that affect the individual, I chose to proceed from the farthest to the closest. As such, I begin with describing the problem of chronic absenteeism within the structure of the Canadian compulsory education system, situating the case of broader policy and legislation within the Canadian, international, and historical contexts (Section 2.3). I then discuss provincial, and local policy and legislation related to issues of attendance (Sections 2.4 and 2.5). Subsequently, I review research on the barriers and facilitators of school attendance within a student's community, including neighbourhood, peers, family, and schools (Section 2.6). Finally, I attend to factors particular to an individual, such as health and academic achievement (Section 2.7). However, it is essential to understand how the notion of absenteeism is used in different studies. Therefore, before attending to what affects an individual, I note different terms used to define or describe absenteeism, and to related terms used in the literature (Section 2.2).

2.2. Defining absenteeism as an issue of concern

There are many terms associated with the phenomenon of frequent absences: chronic absenteeism, truancy, school refusal, non-attendance, to name a few. Some of these are used interchangeably, while others are quite distinct. King and Berenstein (2001) summarized 10 years of research on the topic of school refusal, which they define as: "difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression" (p. 197). They concluded that school refusal affects 5% of all school-age children, that it is just as prevalent in girls as it is in boys, and that it is most common to occur between the ages of 5-6 and 10-11. Truancy on the other hand is most commonly associated with older students in middle school and high school years and is defined as deliberately missing school without good cause (Reid, 2010)

In their seminal work, Chang and Romero (2008) established an international consensus for chronic absenteeism defining it as "missing 10 percent or more of the school year regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused" (p. 3). An important contribution of this work was to highlight the importance of paying attention to attendance in the early years, quoting research that has established that children chronically absent in kindergarten show lower level of achievement in mathematics, reading and general knowledge during first grade. Working at the national centre for children in poverty, Chang and Romero further posited that "going to school regularly in

the early years is especially critical for children from families living in poverty, who are less likely to have the resources to help children make up for lost time in the classroom" (2008, p. 3)

2.3. **Attendance in the historical context of compulsory education**

Compulsory school attendance laws have existed in Canada for over 100 years. The first attendance laws in Canada were introduced in Ontario in 1871 (Philips, 1957). It was 20 years later, in 1891, that legislation was introduced requiring children to remain in school until the end of the term in their 14th year. At that time, attendance was not strongly enforced and multiple exemptions, (for example challenges with transportation or employment) allowed children to remain at home. With the introduction of child labour laws and tighter provincial restrictions on leaving school resulted in greater attendance, higher grade completion, and higher income (Oreopoulos, 2006). Similar trends were found in the US by Magro and Finegan (1996), who reported that compulsory schooling legislation combined with child labour laws has significantly increased school attendance for children who might not otherwise attended at all. However, some researchers question the impact of the compulsory laws given the wide spread truancy seen in urban schools into the 21st century (Landes and Solmon, 1972).

2.4. **School attendance in the political context of provincial legislation**

There is a high degree of variance in how provinces address chronic absenteeism. The province of Manitoba, for example, underwent a lengthy process to create an attendance framework for action, which included extensive research and recommendations for implementation. In contrast, in British Columbia, school regulation under the School Act refers to attendance only in terms of duties of teachers to encourage the regular attendance of students. Additionally, the regulation mandates the recording of attendance and communication with families as follows:

> (8) Principals shall ensure that parents or guardians are regularly provided with reports in respect of the student's school progress in intellectual development, human and social development and career development and

the student's attendance and punctuality. (BC Ministry of Education, School Act, Sections 5 and 175)

In Nova Scotia, one of the duties outlined under the general responsibilities and powers of school boards is to "establish an attendance committee to monitor attendance and carry out school board policies in respect of absenteeism of students in the schools" (p. 62) The duties of said attendance committee are:

116 The attendance committee of the school board shall

(a) monitor the attendance of students in schools in the district or region;

(b) take steps to reduce the absenteeism of students from schools in the district or region in accordance with policies of the school board; and

(c) recommend to the school board remedial steps and policies in respect of those students who have been reported to the school board by the principal as being habitually absent from school without acceptable excuse. (1995-96, c. 1, s. 116, p. 62)

Prince Edward Island's School Act also reiterates that the school board should regulate the attendance of students and enforcement of the attendance provision.

In Ontario, attendance policies fall on the shoulders of individual schools. In the Ontario School Act (2011), it states that: "regular attendance at school is critical for the student's learning. To encourage regular attendance by students, school will ensure that students and their parents are informed about the school's policy on attendance" (p.43). Further, intervention for frequent absences, lies under the judgment of the principal: "Where, in the principal's judgement, a student's frequent absences from school are jeopardizing his or her success, school staff should meet with the students and the parents to explain the potential consequences of the absences and discuss steps to be taken to improve attendance" (p. 43).

The Government of Alberta, for example, established a provincial attendance board in 1988, whose role is to help students under the age of 16 who are developing a record of truancy. The board steps in when truancy is a problem and cannot be resolved locally. Furthermore, in 2013, Alberta undertook the "keeping kids in school and engaged with respect to attendance" project that included data collection from students experiencing attendance challenges, as well as secondary data from 16 Alberta school authorities.

In New Brunswick, there is a 6-page attendance policy outlining guidelines for tracking and reporting attendance and best practice interventions.

The trends in Canada are similar to those in the UK, USA and Australia. For example, Ken Reid (2010) documented an effort in Wales, in addressing attendance and behavioural issues beginning with a review report, followed by acceptance of the report's recommendation by the Welsh assembly government and finally the creation of an action plan. Primarily related to attendance, this action plan calls for greater consistency in tracking and monitoring instances of truancy.

In some states in the USA and in the UK, attendance is a matter of law with court provisions, and disciplinary action in the form of fines. For example, in Virginia, three levels of attendance interventions are outlined in a brief, titled Improving School Attendance in Virginia (2005). These are: prevention, early intervention and legal interventions. Severe truancy is dealt with at the Truancy court division.

As shown above, there is a wide variability in how provincial and international legislation addresses the issue of attendance. Even more interesting to note is how different jurisdictions assign responsibility for students' attendance. In the next section, I will highlight different district level policy and programs in support of student attendance.

2.5. Attendance in the local context of policies, programs, and interventions

2.5.1. District policies

As seen in the previous section, in most cases, provincial educational governance bodies leave management of absenteeism to local districts and schools. As in the provincial context, some districts take a unified approach to tackling absenteeism with consistent programming and district wide interventions, while others embed the issue in their tiers of support framework addressing student challenges. There are also significant differences in where and on whom the responsibility of addressing absenteeism falls.

For example, in the Surrey school district, the absenteeism intervention was supported by the Community-Schools Partnership department, whose role is to support

vulnerable students. Although absenteeism occurs at different schools across the district, the intervention was designed for the most under-resourced schools as the impact of chronic absenteeism was most detrimental for already vulnerable students (Chang and Romero, 2008)

2.5.2. Large scale interventions

There is a high degree of variability in the interventions associated with the different forms of absenteeism. Most interventions documented in the literature are focused on truancy or school refusal, which are both forms of absenteeism.

Sutphen, Ford and Flaherty (2010) conducted a review of the literature regarding truancy interventions, and created a typology of truancy interventions. The typology included student and family-based interventions, school-based interventions and community-based interventions. In the student and family-based interventions, the biggest gains were found in incentive based programs, student support programs, relationship-building and monitoring efforts. In the school-based categories, structural changes such as embedded academic support, smaller, more career oriented tracks and special after-hour programs showed benefit in increasing attendance. Finally, community-based interventions included punitive measures such as letters from school, visits from law enforcement, and case management by various community and government organizations such as outreach staff and social workers.

In his seminal work, Kearney (2003), suggested a consistent model of intervention among professionals who address children and youths with school absenteeism. He advocated for a "common definitional and assessment approach as well as design treatment strategies that include all youths with problematic absenteeism" (p. 57). Kearney proposed a psychoanalytical multi-tiered approach broken down into child-, parent-, and family-focused treatment. King and Berenstein, (2001) also add pharmacotherapy as an effective tool for clinical cases of truancy. Ek and Eriksson (2013) described interventions that have been found to have the most beneficial effects on psychiatric diagnosis related to school absenteeism, including social skills training, social exposure, cognitive restructuring and anxiety management.

Sheldon and Epstein have done extensive work (2002, 2006) on the use of family-community-school partnerships in reducing chronic absenteeism. They cite "communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduced student's chronic absenteeism from one year to the next" (p.39). Sheldon (2007) refined the analysis of the driving mechanism behind the effectiveness of community-school-family partnerships in reducing absenteeism. Specifically, he found that outreach to families was a significant factor in schools implementing school, family and community partnerships.

New York City's Mayor's Task Force on chronic absenteeism and school attendance is a unique example of a large-scale intervention that originated at the municipal government level. This intervention saw an awareness ad campaign "It's 9:00 am, Do you know where your children are?" This campaign sought to inform parents that if their child missed more than 20 days of school, there was a good chance they won't graduate. Other intervention activities included peer to peer mentorship, robust tracking and analysis of attendance data, among others. Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) chronicled the efforts and impacts of the task force paying particular attention to how school absenteeism is a civic issue and the strength of civic governments, districts and communities working together to get students to attend school every day. This has been corroborated by Reid (2010) and Ekstrand (2015) who call for multi-agency practice and early intervention in literacy and numeracy.

2.5.3. School level programs

Both in research and in practice, there has been an ongoing attempt to identify and understand how to address the problem of absenteeism effectively. Lauchlan (2003) noted that "research into the various intervention programs available for tackling non-attendance has failed to find any conclusive evidence in favour of a particular approach" (p. 133).

However, Reid (2010) highlighted success with school level programs. In his study, Reid described a school level framework for addressing absenteeism in high school, whereas the students were broken down into 4 color coded groups, depending

on the severity of their absenteeism. Each group had an associated intervention, for example, academic and one-on-one support.

McCluskey, Bynum and Patchim (2004) described an effort to test the effectiveness of an initiative in three schools to reduce truancy within the context of policing included a letter from the principal being sent home followed by a referral to an attendance officer. In both instances, statistically significant improvement to children's attendance was recorded. Later stage interventions, such as referral to a social service agency, only resulted in marginal improvements to attendance.

In 2009, Lehr, Sinclair and Chistenson undertook the review of a longitudinal replication of a prominent absenteeism reduction model developed in Minnesota, called Check and Connect. Check and Connect was primarily developed to work with secondary students through attendance tracking and a 2-year minimum mentorship support focused largely on positive relationships. Their findings suggest that the model was effective in increasing students' engagement in school, which was also corroborated by their teachers.

2.6. **Absenteeism in the community context**

In this section, I discuss relevant research on the impact of absenteeism in the social realms of children including schools, families and neighbourhoods. I begin by describing risk factors that have been found in the literature linked to chronic absenteeism. I then turn to factors pertaining to schools, specifically school culture, teachers, staff and peers, followed by a discussion of partnerships, families and neighbourhoods.

2.6.1. Risk factors

According to Teasley (2004), risk factors associated with absenteeism fall into a number of categories including: school, personal, developmental, family related, community and neighbourhood, and ethnic minority status. Reid (2010) extended this list to include the influence of friends and peers, relationship with teachers, content delivery of the curriculum, bullying, and the classroom context.

In his seminal work, Kearney (2008) outlined risk factors associated with absenteeism in youth. Those included "homelessness and poverty, teenage pregnancy, school violence and victimization, school climate and connectedness, parental involvement, and family variables" (p.451).

Corvill-Smith, Ryan, Adams and Dalicantro (1998) sought to distinguish absentee students from regular attenders using personal, family and school factors. Their results show that absentee students, as compared to regular attenders, are less likely to perceive school experiences favourably. In particular, absentee students were found to be more likely to perceive parental discipline as lax or inconsistent, were more likely to perceive stronger attempts by parents at control, felt inferior academically, experienced family conflict, and were less likely to be socially competent in their relations in class.

2.6.2. School

Structure, culture and climate

In a study looking at attendance trajectories in the transition period between middle school and high school, Benner and Wang (2014) found that school size, racial diversity of the student population and the school's socio-economic status all constituted risk factors for absenteeism in high school. The impact of school climate on student absenteeism, among other factors, was also documented by Haynes, Emmons and Ben-Avie (1997). This was studied within the larger context of understanding school climate as a factor in student adjustment and achievement, of which attendance plays a significant part.

Teachers and support staff

Davis and Dupper (2008) highlighted an often-overlooked factor contributing to student drop out – quality of relationships between teachers and students. They noted that students who felt valued and accepted by teachers and peers had a higher level of prosocial behaviour, greater motivation for learning and fewer conduct problems.

Peers

Farmer, Estell, Leung, Trott, Bishop and Cairns (2003) investigated the link between individual aggression and popular peer group affiliation as risk factors for

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dropping out. These researchers found an interesting trend where aggressive participants who were socially isolated dropped out, but non-aggressive youth who were socially isolated tended to complete school. With regard to popular peer groups, membership in popular groups was linked to dropping out, while membership in a non-popular group served as a protective factor for aggressive youth.

There is also evidence of the impact of absenteeism and its impact on non-absentee peers. Gottfried (2014) found that consequences of chronic absenteeism extended to classroom peer outcomes as well. He found that higher levels of tardiness within a classroom caused a higher frequency of problem behaviours and lower levels of social skills such as self-control, approaches to learning and interpersonal skills.

2.6.3. Families

The relationship and impact of families on school absenteeism has been researched widely in the last decade, identifying both direct and indirect links. An example of an indirect link comes from a study by Bögels, van Oosten, Muris and Smulders (2001) that found that mothers' social anxiety, mothers' report of family sociability and the children's report of maternal overprotection all predicted social anxiety of the child. The link between social anxiety and absenteeism is discussed in section 2.7.5 below.

Berenstein and Borchardt (1996) conducted a study of one hundred and thirty-four families of children with school refusal looking at the relationship between family functioning and school refusal. These authors found that single mothers of school refusing children scored higher indicating problems in role performance and communication sections of the measure. Berenstein and Borchardt (1996) argue that problems with role performance suggest disagreement between family members about role definitions and difficulty adapting to new and changing roles within the family. Insufficient, displaced or masked communication were examples of problems in communication between mothers and children.

Kearney (2007) also documented parental factors in school attendance. Most of these factors were attributed to cultural background such as language barriers and other cultural differences, for example, lower expectation for educational attainment of female

students. Other factors included lower acculturation, parental opposition to a child's distance from family by way of higher education, relaxed attitude about developmental milestones or self-reliance skills, school based racism and discrimination and parental mistrust of school officials.

Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler (2014) sought to investigate the relationship between family income, school attendance and academic achievement. They found that, receipt of free or reduced-priced lunch (the proxy for families' income), and duration of receipt had positive association with student absences. They also found that the correlation between absences and achievement was significantly stronger than between tardiness and achievement. "In other words, missing an entire day of school appears to be worse for children's school performance than missing part of the day. When children arrive late, they have an opportunity to catch up on the day's lesson" (Morrissey, Hutchison & Winsler 2014 p.751).

In a research report, Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) examined the attitudes of parents towards student attendance, with particular focus on whether attitudes of parents whose children have persistent absenteeism problems differed from those of parents whose children never or rarely missed school. They found that most parents considered school attendance an important issue, but there were four different categories parents fell into regarding their perceived efficacy in supporting consistent attendance. In the first group were parents who were described as trying hard to tackle poor attendance. In the second group were parents who self-described feeling powerless to tackle poor attendance. In the third group were parents who appeared over-protective of, or dependent on their child. And the fourth group included parents who were either apathetic about addressing attendance or who appeared not to be engaged with the school. They also found that parents who themselves struggled with attendance as students had a greater proportion of children with chronic absenteeism. This study has a lot of similarities to my work, which is situated within the BC context. I describe in detail how my research is related to Dalziel and Henthorne's findings in Chapter 5.

2.6.4. Neighbourhood

Gottfried (2014) explored how neighbourhood attributes can predict school absences. He found significant relationships between school absences and multiple factors of neighbourhood attributes across measures of poverty, family structure, homeownership status and race. General findings from his study suggest that lower percent of neighbors living at or below the poverty line, higher average income, size of household, percentage of neighbours owning their home were all associated with fewer school days missed.

An editorial brief by Bown and Richman (2002) brought to light the multiple community variants that affect children. For example, they noted that "student reports of crime in the neighbourhood had a particularly strong effect on their educational behaviour – both directly and indirectly influencing the likelihood that students would experience problem behaviour, problem attendance and lower grades" (p.69).

2.7. Absenteeism in the individual context

In this section, I attend to relevant literature on the documented intersections of absenteeism and the personal lives of students, including their academic achievement, social development, physical and mental health and risky behaviours.

2.7.1. Academic achievement

The impact of absenteeism on academic achievement and classroom social cohesion has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Gottfried, 2010, 2011). Gottfried (2009) helped qualify the link between absenteeism and achievement by highlighting the necessity to differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. He found that higher proportion of unexcused absences put students at academic risk, particularly for achievement in mathematics and as early as in elementary school. He noted that "students who miss school for excused reasons may be otherwise academically engaged and can thus offset the consequences of missing school" (p.411). This is significant because it shows that educational outcomes play out differently for students with different kinds of absences.

Whereas Gottfried's work was localized to one urban school district in the USA, work by Ginsburg, Jordan and Chang (2014) found similar results of lower scores on national standardized tests for students with higher absenteeism based on USA national testing data. They additionally found that absenteeism in kindergarten can affect whether a child develops grit and perseverance, that absenteeism in preschool and kindergarten can influence whether a child will be held back in the third grade and that absenteeism in the first month of school can predict chronic absence for the entire year.

Benner and Wang (2014) noted a significant decline in attendance in the transition from middle school to high school. This was particularly evident in students who were previously disengaged from school academically, further adding to the connection between academic engagement, performance and absenteeism.

The impact of absenteeism has been recorded in undergraduate education as well. Marburger (2010a, 2010b) noted that exam performance was strongly inversely correlated with attendance and that enforcing a mandatory attendance policy significantly reduced absenteeism and improved exam performance.

2.7.2. Social and emotional development

Gottfried (2014) documented the effects of chronic absenteeism on students' social and emotional outcomes. He found that of the four measures pertaining to social skills, approaches to learning, eagerness to learn, self-control and interpersonal skills, the only ones that were negatively associated with absenteeism were those most closely related to educational and social engagement.

2.7.3. Bullying

The link between bullying and absenteeism have not yet been well substantiated. Anecdotally, it will not come as a surprise that children who experience bullying are more likely to experience attendance problems. Reid (2010) noted that increasingly, bullying in all its forms is becoming a reason for students' non-attendance. However, Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara and Kernic (2005) found no link between bullying and attendance in the context of elementary school using a measure of self-reported involvement in bullying.

2.7.4. Physical health

Illness plays a large role in student absenteeism. For example, Neuzil, Hohlbein and Zhu (2002) followed 100 students over a period of 37 school days and recorded 63 missed school days due to respiratory illness related to the influenza virus. Henderson, Hill, and Norton (2014) in Oregon published a report on the connection between chronic absenteeism and health, positioning chronic absenteeism as a public health issue. Henderson et al. (2014) further found that the health issues most commonly associated with absenteeism included respiratory illnesses, fever, gastrointestinal conditions, followed by communicable diseases, dental issues and seizures.

Not surprisingly, chronic health conditions affect student attendance. Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, and Castro (2006) investigated the relationship between severity of asthma and missed school days. They found that over 30% of absences were directly linked to asthma-related symptoms. They also noted that children with asthma were absent from school 1.3 mean days more compared to their healthy peers and this appeared to be driven by the underlying severity of the symptoms.

Similarly, students with Type-1 diabetes have also been found to miss more days of school than their peers (Glaab, Brown & Daneman, 2005) Interestingly, they found that it was not only the child's illness that caused children to miss more schooling. Instead, it was parental decisions that accounted for most of the difference. Specifically, the researchers noted parents reporting that they would allow their children to remain home from school more frequently.

Other chronic conditions found in the literature related to student absences include sickle cell anemia, chronic pain, abdominal pain, musculoskeletal pain and juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (Henderson, Hill & Norton, 2014).

With regard to health interventions that address chronic absenteeism, in 2015 the United States of America's National Collaborative on Education and Health issued a brief on chronic absenteeism and school health. In it, effective school health interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism are recommended. Those included: local school health services such as a public health nurse practicing in the school, providing students with healthy meals, increasing physical education and physical activity of

students to a minimum of 60 minutes per day, and measures to ensure healthy school buildings, such as clean air and facilities that are regularly and properly cleaned.

As another health-related initiative, Guinan, McGuckin and Ali (2002) documented the effects of a comprehensive handwashing program on absenteeism in elementary schools. They found over 50% decrease in absenteeism over a three-month period, which was attributed to handwashing, education and the use of hand-sanitizers in classrooms. Clearly, cleaner hands contributed to the healthier environment for students which resulted in fewer school absences. Dyer, Shinder and Shinder (2000) compared handwashing to the use of hand sanitizer in reducing illness related absences in elementary schools. They found a significant decrease in gastrointestinal- and respiratory-related absences with the use of hand sanitizer compared to the handwashing method.

2.7.5. Mental health

As more information about child and youth mental health becomes widely available, many schools, districts, and educational boards and governments are starting to take note of the role that mental health plays in attendance and school performance. DeSocio and Hootman (2004) did an integrative review of the literature to examine the impact of children's mental health on school success. They found that poor academic functioning and inconsistent school attendance were identified as early signs of emerging or existing mental health problems.

Ek and Eriksson (2013) looked into the psychosocial factors behind truancy. They found that over 90% of students with school refusal have some form of psychiatric diagnosis with the most common of these being depression, separation anxiety and social phobias. Lane, Carter, Pierson, and Glaser (2006) noted alarmingly high levels of absenteeism demonstrated by students with emotional disturbances with the average missing 24 days a year. Egger, Costello, and Angold (2003) found a distinction between anxious school refusal and truancy, both associated with psychopathology, and with adverse experiences at home and school. They further elaborated that fear of school was the most common fear in children with anxiety. The authors argued that children's fears of school might arise from external adverse experiences, rather than from internal conflicts. Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005) examined the effects of long-term

engagement with the Check and Connect program on promoting school completion for urban youth with emotional or behavioural disabilities. The outcomes of the intervention included lower rates of dropout and mobility, higher rates of persistent attendance, and school completion.

Lounsbury, Steel, Loveland and Gibson (2004) looked at personality traits as a link to absenteeism. Specifically, they looked at the big five personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness as well as four narrower traits of aggression, optimism, tough-mindedness and work drive in relation to absences from school. They found that almost all big five traits significantly negatively correlated with absences, while only aggression, optimism and work drive contributed to predicting absences. These results indicate that student absences can be predicted on the basis of openness, emotional stability, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Recommendations put forth by the National Collaborative on Education and Health (2015) include access to school-based mental health programs as well as a full array of prevention, mental health promotion, early intervention and treatment programs for students. Results from an initiative by Baltimore City Public Schools indicated increases in mathematics and reading scores and in attendance compared to a previous year for students with access to the expanded mental health programs.

2.7.6. Risky behaviours

Hallford, Vevea, Iritani, and Cho (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of risk factors associated to substance use in youth. They found a strong positive correlation between truancy and the risk of youth to use and abuse substances. Eaton Brener and Kann (2008) corroborated these findings in their study of over 4500 grade 9 and 11 students looking at over 50 factors of risky behaviours, including possession of weapons, substance use, sexual activity, physical violence and others. They found that students who were absent from school for any reason were significantly more likely to engage in health risk behaviours than their attending peers.

2.8. **Summary**

As noted, there has been extensive research focusing on attendance and absenteeism, and the issue has received significant attention from initiatives like Attendance Works and the NYC Mayor's Task Force on absenteeism in the USA. In Canada, the issue has not yet gained major attention, but more and more school and district staff are recognizing the detrimental effects of absenteeism and are looking for interventions at different levels to combat the problem.

Through this literature review, I have shown that absenteeism has been researched from a variety of angles. In particular, research drew connections between absenteeism and factors related to students' lives, such as neighbourhood, community school and family environment. While the family traits were studied extensively in relation to student absenteeism, research on parents views is rather slim. Research of Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) in the United Kingdom is a notable exception. While the role of parents in education is well researched, the relationship between parent's views and chronic absenteeism was not a focus of recent studies in the Canadian context. My study was designed to fill the gap of understanding parents' role in supporting attendance from the perspective of their values of school, daily challenges and lived experience.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods used to conduct this study. I first situate the study in the context of a larger research project and state my research questions. Then, I explain the data sources, how the data collection instrument was designed and used, and how the data were analyzed and presented. I also outline the data analysis framework and technique and provide justification for its use within the context of this study.

3.1. Context

The current study was a part of a larger study that looked at parent, staff and administrator perceptions of chronic absenteeism and was conducted over a period of three years within the context of the Attendance Matters program. As noted earlier, the Attendance Matters program was designed in the Surrey school district as an early absenteeism intervention for students in Kindergarten-grade 3.

The program began with a pilot school site in 2010/2011, then expanded to 8 sites in 2011/2012, 12 sites in 2012/2013, 15 sites in 2013/2014, 18 sites in 2014/2015 and 21 sites in 2015/2016. I began facilitating the program in the 2012/2013 school year and the data for this research was collected in the 2013/2014 school year. The participating schools were chosen based on Surrey district's inner city designation, that ranks schools based on vulnerability using parameters such as transiency, home ownership, social housing, and other socio-economic factors. By 2016/2017, the program was operating in all of Surrey's 25 designated inner city schools, all of which are located in the Newton, Guildford and Whalley neighbourhoods.

The Attendance Matters program includes three parts: breakfast club, literacy support, and case management. In high vulnerability areas, breakfast club provides basic needs for families living in poverty and reduces food as a barrier to school participation. Literacy enrichment in the morning provides vulnerable students with an opportunity to build their skills in a non-threatening environment and extend their comfort with reading materials into the classroom. Each Attendance Matters school has a literacy

cart that was stocked by a district literacy helping teacher and includes a wide range of literacy materials from picture and search books, to pattern building, and magnetic letters. Over the years, new materials were introduced, representing the BC's redesigned curricular and core competencies. Materials such as Lego®, play dough, puppets, small card and board games help support student's thinking, communication skills, and provide opportunities to practice social and personal responsibility. As part of the Attendance Matters program, each school had a dedicated outreach worker whose duties included maintaining a case load of families whose children are chronically absent. The case management included identification of chronically absent students, diagnosis of the barriers contributing to absenteeism, troubleshooting solutions, implementing an intervention and monitoring progress. To accomplish this, outreach workers rely on the development of positive relationships with the child, and the parent, and expand that relationship network to include other school professionals.

Within the framework of the Attendance Matters program, the larger research project was conducted in three phases:

Phase 1: Absence data was collected using the District's student information system from the 15 participating inner-city schools where the Attendance Matters program operated in 2012-2014

Phase 2: Phone interviews were conducted with parents of students who were absent from one of the participating schools after each occurrence. Outreach workers conducted these interviews relying on their pre-existing relationships with the families.

Phase 3: Face-to-face in depth interviews were conducted with a subset of parents selected from the second phase as well as with parents of children with regular attendance.

This thesis reports on data collected in Phase 3 in relation to the stated research questions:

1. How do participating parents perceive the purpose of schooling?

2. At what point do parents believe that absences become a barrier to a student's learning?

3. What are the barriers and facilitators to consistent school attendance?

4. What programs or resources do parents cite or note as being available or necessary to assist in a given absence scenario or circumstance?

3.2. **Participants**

This study was conducted in the Surrey School District, which was chosen based on a previous relationship, established during the previous two phases of the larger study. This district is also the one in which I worked and had access to the program and participants.

Participants in this study were parents of early elementary school students (grades K-3) from the 15 schools participating in the Attendance Matters program. Participants were recruited utilizing existing relationships with Community-Schools Partnership outreach workers. The outreach workers were given invitation letters and a selection criteria and were asked to approach families they had positive relationships with to invite them to part take in the study. Given the vulnerable nature of the population in the 15 participating schools, such a recruitment strategy was necessary to maintain the strong rapport and trust between the outreach workers, researchers and the participants.

Selection criteria included parents who had at least one child in grades K-3, who had an existing relationship with the school's outreach worker. Note that outreach workers provided support in the school beyond their case load of students, such as greeting students and parents at the door and leading classroom activities. Within this scope, they established relationships with parents of both chronically absent and non-chronically absent students. For the purpose of comparison, it was important to have both parents of students who were chronically absent and those who weren't. Demographic information of gender and Aboriginal status was not part of the selection criteria, but was also collected.

A total of 54 parents participated in the study. Table 3.1 summarizes the demographic indicators of participants.

Table 3.1.   Demographic Summary

Demographic indicator	Number of parents 1
Male	3
Female	51
Aboriginal	13
Parents of students who are chronically absent	19
Parents of students with normative attendance patterns	21
Families not being case managed	25
Families accessing case-management support	21

For a more detailed view on participants, please see Appendix A. It provides the following information for each participant: the grades of their children, school code, Aboriginal status, whether at least one of their children was chronically absent at the time of data collection and whether the family was being case managed at the time of data collection.

3.3. **Data Source**

Data for this study came from face-to-face interviews with 54 parents of K-3 students at 15 schools that had the Attendance Matters program. Note that there were 54 participants but 55 interviews; One of the parents was interviewed twice for the purpose of follow up on some information the parent provided in the first interview. The two interviews were compiled into one file for the analysis.

In person interviews were chosen for data collection as they provide a lens on participants views and beliefs, and allowed for prompting and follow up elaboration (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009) In consultation with District staff, it was decided that the interviewed population would not be receptive to other methods of data collection, such as surveys. Care was taken to establish trustworthiness through the iterative rounds of data analysis, as elaborated in Section 3.6 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

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[1] Please note that some demographic information was missing. Therefore the numbers of parents in the demographic indicators will not always add up to 54.

3.4. **Data Collection**

Utilizing their existing relationships with parents, outreach workers at all 15 schools were asked to invite parents of K-3 students to participate in the face-to-face interviews. Outreach workers were provided with selection criteria and were asked to arrange a meeting time between the parents and the interviewer.

All interviews took place at one of the 15 schools either before, during, or after school between November 2013 and March 2014. I conducted the interviews in the fall then a graduate research assistant and the supervisor / researcher in charge of the larger study, took over in the spring (due to my maternity leave). Participation was completely voluntary and at the onset of the interview, all participants signed an informed consent form (See Appendix C), that provided them with details of the study, their rights as well as protocols assuring their anonymity and confidentiality. Each parent received a coffee and muffin during the interview and was further compensated for their time with a $25 gift card to a low-cost grocery store.

The interviews began with the interviewer introducing herself and thanking the participant for their time. Some participants came to the interview with younger siblings and the interviewer made sure that the children were comfortable by offering them quiet activities such as drawing pages and picture books.

Demographic data such as whether the student was classified as chronically absent, whether they were part of an outreach worker's caseload, the Aboriginal ancestry of the family, as well as home language and immigration status were collected using the District's student information system.

Most interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviewer asked the questions in sequence (see interview protocol in Appendix B) giving participants ample time to respond. If participants were hesitant to answer, a prompt was provided followed by a reminder that the participant did not have to answer the question and that they could skip any question if they so chose. Participants were also reminded of the confidentiality of their responses.

The interviewers took extensive notes of the participants' responses indicating any additional prompting required. An attempt was made to note precisely the

expressions that the participants used. The decision not to audio record the interviews was made in consultation with the outreach workers and district representatives due the vulnerable nature of the participant population.

At the completion of the interviews, the interviewer, reviewed, and summarized the notes and any additional observations or comments where added where necessary. Subsequently, all interview notes were entered into an Excel database for analysis.

3.5. **Instrument**

As mentioned previously, this study reports on data collected in Phase 3 of a research project into the causes and barriers associated with chronic absenteeism. I was involved with the previous two phases and had in depth knowledge of the data collection and analysis procedures.

At the end of data collection of Phase 2, which included outreach worker telephone interviews with parents each day after an absence occurred, data were coded by themes. After the themes were generated, the research team came up with further questions based on the gathered responses. In the planning stage of Phase 3 (the current study), a semi-structured interview protocol was created based on the questions that arose in the analysis of the phone interviews and in relation to the stated research questions.

Questions were developed to better understand some of the themes that were generated by the phone data. For example, when asked why their child was absent, a clear majority of parents reported that their child was ill. However, there was a sense that at least in some case, parents were giving what they perceived was an acceptable answer, rather than providing the actual reason for the absence.

The interview questions were formulated intentionally as follows: (See Appendix B for a complete list of questions included in the interview protocol).

- **Questions 1-4** intended to put the participant at ease while taking an in-depth look at family interactions.

- **Questions 5, and 6** sought to inform the answer RQ1

- **Questions 7-10** sought to understand patterns of absenteeism behaviours from the parent's perspective and address RQ's 3 and 4

- **Question 11** specifically targeted RQ2

- **Question 12** was aimed at revealing parents' perspective on relevant research information, when this information was shared with them

- **Questions 13 and 14** were designed to further inform RQ4

- **Question 15** was meant to allow the participant to share additional information about the topic that was not covered by the questions asked.

The interview design was emergent. Additional questions were added as needed based on the resultant data.

As a semi-structured interview protocol, it was followed loosely to allow for flexibility to adjust the questions to specific participant responses. At times, parents offered additional information raising issues that were not asked while others required some prompting. When prompting was needed, an explicit request for elaboration was carefully initiated.

3.6. **Data Analysis**

This study used modified analytical induction as a methodological tool (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Smelser & Baltes, 2001) in which, the theories, possible explanations and even phenomena of interest are modified throughout the study in order to formulate a relationship between the definition and explanation of the particular phenomenon. I chose this methodology as it allowed an avenue for inclusion of all participants' voices and provided a meaning making mechanism to generate and share the new understanding of parental role in absenteeism.

This required the generation of a preliminary working theory with respect to a chosen phenomenon of interest, a theory which is modified and refined based on the collected data in an iterative process. In this study, the phenomenon of interest was broken into three sub categories in relation to parents' understanding of the following:

1. The purpose of schooling

2. The relationship between absenteeism and learning

3. Barriers and facilitators to healthy school attendance

The working theory that addressed these questions began as an assumption regarding parents' role in aiding chronic absenteeism as stemming from their beliefs about the above questions. Specifically, I assumed that parents of chronically absent students would have limited understanding of the relationship between absenteeism and learning. This assumption was based on the interactions I had with parents of students participating in the Attendance Matters program. I further assumed that parents' choices regarding attendance were largely based on their perception of the purpose of schooling. I was specifically expecting to find that parents whose perception of the value of schooling was congruent and consistent with views accepted in the District, would provide greater support to their child's attendance than parents who had different views on the purpose of schooling.

The hypothesis that was the starting point for the analysis can be articulated as: Parents beliefs about the link between attendance and academic success are dependent on their understanding of the purpose of schooling.

As modified analytic induction dictates, the analysis involves iterative rounds, where each additional subsection of data is tested against the hypothesis, either corroborating it or providing counterargument. The hypothesis is then re-phrased or re-worded to create consistency with the goal being that the re-framed hypothesis represents all evidence from the data. Following this method, interview data was analyzed systematically to find corroborating evidence and those that contrasted with the hypothesis. The explanative statements were modified each time to include all the data points.

This study involved three iterative rounds of analysis. In the first round, I noted to what research question each question from the interview contributed. For example, P47 noted that, "If she misses 2 days, she is 2 days behind. It's a big impact. Whatever the teacher taught, she missed". This excerpt was identified as related to research question 2 (At what point do parents believe that absences become a barrier to a student's learning?). In the next two rounds, I identified particular themes and subthemes, not necessarily disjoint, within the responses related to each research question and coded the excerpts according to the identified themes. The excerpt from the interview with P47 was coded as the theme "absences as a barrier to learning", followed by subthemes

"numerical" and "every absence counts". Frequencies of repeated occurrences for each theme were noted. The findings presented in the next chapter are organized according to research questions and identified subthemes. My rephrased and refined hypothesis on the relationship between parents' beliefs and student absenteeism is presented at the end of Chapter 4.

Chapter 4.

Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings from the study. The findings are organized according to the research questions followed by the emerging themes and sub-themes. Quotes from the interviews help illustrate each theme. Each quote, is followed by a number and a letter Y or N such as [P27, Y]. The number refers to participant ID and the letter determines whether the participant is a parent of a chronically absent child. Appendix A provides a complete list of participant demographic information.

4.1. Parent perception of the benefit of schooling

In order to explore the participating parents' perceptions of the purpose of schooling, I analyzed the data related to Research Question 1. Here I am drawing primarily from responses to interview questions 5, and 6, which asked participants what they believed were some of the purposes behind schooling, and the benefits of the grade their child was in. Notably, some parents' perceptions were evident in their responses to other questions which are also reported here.

4.1.1. Major importance

Social

All of the participants reported that one of the reasons behind schooling was social interaction. In 22 (40%) out of the 54 interviews, the social aspect of schooling was mentioned first. Some parents described the purpose in terms of gaining social skills, while others described the benefit of school as the opportunity to socialize. The excerpts below exemplify particular social interactions mentioned by parents.

> To socialize… You can home school but they have to learn to be with other kids, socialize and not be segregated. They need to learn to respect people who are not family. [P27,Y]

> Interact with others, work and play together. Keeps everybody community oriented. [P33, N]

Social aspects. Got bullied last year – learned a lot. Met with principal and learned how to walk away. [P29, Y]

The first two excerpts exemplify the repeating themes of "work together" and "respect". The third excerpt was chosen to demonstrate a student's coping with an undesirable social situation. Other examples provided by parents mentioned learning self-discipline, taking turns in play and sharing materials

Social skills – deal with people, friendships, conflict. [P11, N]

Learning teamwork, how to share, manners, learning about social rules and emotional regulation. [P37, Y]

Academic

Compared to the social benefits of schooling which appeared in all responses, only 27(42%) out of 54 respondents mentioned academics as one of the most important benefits of schooling. Several examples that note students' learning are:

Really important – learning how to learn. [P5, N]

Brains are sponges. It's the prime time to learn the most. Once the foundation has been built in the younger years, they can learn more in the later grades. [P35, Y]

Good stepping stone to learning, to educate and teach them, guide them along the right path. [P17, N]

Parents were mostly using general terms like "learning", "study" and "education". However, they also mentioned specific topics and skills, such as: reading, spelling, writing, and mathematics. For example:

Learn how to print, how to spell, learn reading and basic mathematics. [P35, Y]

4.1.2. Marginal importance

Life prep – routines, structures, discipline

When asked about the most important elements of schooling, 7(20.5%) of 34[2] participants reported "preparation for real life". The following two excerpts exemplify different aspects of life beyond schooling.

> At home, he does whatever he wants, at school there is a schedule. [P37, Y]

> Different perspectives, cultures. Beyond just information, life skills. [P16, N]

Note that while P37 mentioned schedule, other parents referenced routines, structures and discipline in their responses. P16 exemplified life skills as exposure to different perspectives and cultures. This was echoed by other parents, who mentioned that children needed to learn how to adhere to social norms that come with being in a school environment, as illustrated below:

> Socialize with other kids. Learning to be away from comfort zone, immediate family. [P7, N]

> Interacting with other kids his age, following instructions, learning to sit quietly, be a good student. [P11, N]

> Get along in big groups, learn how to respect authority figures, playing and relating to kids. It's a diverse school – he is being exposed to different cultures. [P22, Y]

The last two excerpts highlight the types of non-academic skills that parents expect to be taught and practiced at school and exemplify what they consider the benefit of schooling to be.

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[2] Note that the number of respondents to each question is different as not all participants responded to all the questions.

4.1.3. Other

When participants were asked about the benefits of their child attending school, 10 parents also reported challenges, 4 of them specifically noted the full day kindergarten structure:

> The full day K is horrible. It's too much for her. She is so little and she is so tired when she gets home. [P55, Y]

Two parents suggested that the benefit of schooling was free child care. For example:

> That they are in school – mom gets a break. [P39, Y]

4.2. Absences as a barrier to learning

In order to understand how they perceive the relationship between absences and learning, parents were explicitly asked for their opinions regarding when absences became a barrier to a child's learning (Question 11 in the interview protocol, see Appendix B). Responses tended to be numerical, or descriptive with regards to the impact of absences on learning, or a combination of the two. Those who characterized the impact on learning as not necessarily dependent upon the number of absences noted the reason behind them. Specific examples included: whether the absences were consecutive or not, the grade in which the student is in, what the child does while absent as well as the child's previous academic track record.

4.2.1. Numerical

Frequency

A slight majority of the respondents (29 out of 49) reported that the frequency of absences was a good measure to determine the impact on learning. Interestingly, while some parents provided a specific number of absences by week, others provided their responses in number of absences per month and others by year.

> Shouldn't be missing more than 5 days a year. I am pretty strict. [P3, N]

> Missing 5-6 days per month. They feel left out or not feeling a part of something. [P32, N]

Missing too many days in one month 10-15 is excessive. 1 or 2 days is a different story. [P17,N]

Note that there is a wide variability in the threshold for the frequency of absences that parents view as the tipping point where absences become a barrier for learning. While a formal comparative analysis was not conducted, there was no apparent difference in the variation between parents whose children were chronically absent and those who were not.

Consecutive

Five (16%) out of 31 parents specifically pointed to consecutive absences as being the sources of negative impact on learning with the range of days spanning from 2-3 days to a full week. As exemplified in the excerpts below, parents suggested that consecutive absences would make it difficult for a child to catch up on school work.

> 3 days in a row makes it complicated because a teacher can cover so much in those 3 days or not so much, it's difficult to know. It's hard for a child to catch up when they get back from missing 3 days because they are trying to make up for the work they missed and work on what their classmates are working on. A child may get frustrated when they try to catch up after missing 3 days or more and they may give up. [P35, Y]

> It depends if it's consecutive. If it's once every couple of weeks, I don't see it making a difference. [P50, N/A]

> The more they miss, the less they get out of school. If a child misses more that 2-3 days in a row, I come in and get homework so she doesn't get behind. [P2, N]

Every absence

A smaller group of participants (n=5) noted that every single day absence had the potential to become a barrier for learning.

> One day- a lot happens in a day. [P7, N]

> Very much. If she misses 2 days, she is 2 days behind. It's a big impact. Whatever the teacher taught, she missed. [P47, N/A]

Late

While not explicitly asked, 6 parents brought up the issue of being late for school as connected to being absent. They suggested that being late has a similar effect on learning, as seen in the following excerpt:

When constantly late – they miss too much in the crucial first half hour and it affects their whole day. [P6, N]

One parent noted that when students are late, it is highly disruptive to the learning of the whole class

Being late is very disruptive to the other children. [P53, N/A]

4.2.2. Child and Family Factors

Six parents shared the sentiment that the point at which absences become a barrier to children's learning was highly dependent upon the child's aptitude, the reason for the absence and what they do at home on the day of the absence. For example:

Every kid is different. My kids do lots of work at home that they are not learning in school. My kids are getting bored in school so I am not worried about them missing school. [P31, N]

Signs of needing improvement with grades or skills. [P15, N]

If they already have a hard time learning. [P51, N/A]

Depends on the child – If having academic problem, then yes it might (become a barrier to learning). [P29, Y]

It's not a number. It's the reason behind it. If a kid is at home because parents are too tired or if a kid is at home for a good reason. [P22, Y]

While a formal comparative analysis was done across groups, the belief that absences impact different children differently appears to be consistent for parents whose children were on the case load of the outreach worker, and those whose child was a regular attender. One other interesting response had to do with parent's own life experience as related to their child's attendance:

Only miss school days if sick. I (only) have a high school education and it's difficult to get a job. [P41, Y]

4.2.3. Elective absences

Perceptions regarding the connection between absences and learning were also evident when parents were asked to share their thoughts on keeping a child from school for special bonding time or as a reward. Out of the 24 parents who provided a response to the question, at what point do absences become a barrier to student's learning, 11 (45%) responded that the practice was acceptable and that they themselves did it occasionally. However, 13 (54%) of the respondents reported negative reaction to the practice. Eight out of 13 (61%) parents in the non-chronically absent category reported not agreeing with taking children out of school for special occasions. This was contrasted with 6 (55%) out of 11 parents from the chronically absent group feeling similarly toward the practice. While numbers are too small to draw a definite conclusion, the percentages are similar.

Agreeable

Parents who agreed with the practice of taking their children out of school specified certain conditions. These conditions or reasons included family time or support for children's emotional needs or in the case where parents worked on weekends. For example:

> If parents work on weekends then it's ok. But otherwise should only be home if sick. [P4, N]

> Not as a reward but sometimes I keep my son home from school when his anxiety is really high. My son gets especially anxious around special holidays like Valentine's Day so sometimes we keep him home for a "private day". [P22, Y]

Others reported that the decision criteria for letting a child miss school was whether the child's schoolwork was up to date

> If caught up on work, maybe 1 day won't be that bad. [P30, Y]

Other parents supported the practice in general:

> Sometimes it's okay if it's needed. It's important to have bonding time. I can read the signs when a child needs me. It happens only occasionally. [P10, N]

I've done that one or two times this year. It's good because he feels good about having special time. My mom used to do that with me. Pick one day a month and spend time with family and friends. [P37, Y]

With my older daughter we took each Wednesday a mental health day to break up the week. It was necessary for her to keep enjoying school – to cope better. She was a very high needs kid. When we weren't doing that, she was very apprehensive about school. [P, N/A]

As exemplified in the interview excerpts above, parents who support the practice of leaving children at home on school days have articulated specific benefits for their children, such as bonding, having special family time, and for mental health.

Not agreeable

Parents who did not support the practice of taking children out of school for special time suggested that school was "the children's job" and expressed adamant rejection of the idea of letting children miss school.

Would never do that. Education is the most important. Spend special time with them after school. [P41, Y]

Wow No! School is their job. [P21, Y]

Don't agree. More important to be a part of her schooling. [P33, N]

Parents used strong language to show their disapproval of taking children out of school. Most argued the importance of school as a reason for their disapproval. For example, P41 offers a counterargument for parents who consider "family bonding" as a personal permission to miss school. Spending time with the children after school is her suggested alternative.

Sharing research on absences

Towards the end of the interview we shared research findings on the impact of chronic absenteeism with the parents. Participants were informed that the literature suggested that even "school ready" students who miss just 20 days (10%) each year between K-3 begin to show gaps in achievement and socialization starting in grade 3. These students are more likely to drop out of high school, and are less likely to continue with postsecondary education. We then asked participants if being aware of this information would change how people think about attendance in the early grades.

Parents responded in one of three ways: 36 (66%) out 54 expressed surprise at the relationship and thought that knowing this would or should make a difference; 10 (18.5) out of 54 expressed mixed feelings or presented caveats around circumstances in which these relationships might or might not exist; finally, 8 (15%) out of 54 expressed disagreement or disbelief that knowing this information would change behaviour of parents.

Some parents responded in a personal way, occasionally sharing anecdotes from their experiences:

> Yes, because I am a high school dropout. At 27, I just got Grade 12 now instead of doing it at first. [P6, N]

> Yes. My dad moved me around to a lot of different schools when I was young and I missed a lot. [P10, N]

> Definitely. I didn't know that. Makes me feel bad for keeping her at home but I mean it depends on the situation. You joke as a parent – Oh what will they miss – drawing? The ABC's? but now I feel horrible. [P27, Y]

> Depends on how parents raise children. I don't find this to be true. I know kids who missed a lot of school and they now have good jobs. My son missed a lot of school last year and it was hard on him. [P41, Y]

> That's horrible! My daughter is never missing anymore. Well, my daughter will be coming to school every day next year. All parents should know this. Give it to the principal and he can put it on the website and newsletter. [P49, N/A]

> I think so. With my mom, when I was in grade 7 my parents didn't enforce attendance and I fell behind. I am on my kids to go to school because it's really important. Many people brush it off as "oh it's just one day" but it adds up. [P52, N/A]

These excerpts demonstrate that parents draw personal conclusions from the presented information, such as P27's reflection on her feelings and parenting, "Makes me feel bad for keeping her at home but I mean it depends on the situation. You joke as a parent – Oh what will they miss – drawing? The ABC's? but now I feel horrible".

There is an interesting tension in the response of P41, who claimed "I know kids who missed a lot of school and they now have good jobs". This knowledge lets P41 to contradict research results, saying "I don't find this to be true". Obviously, these findings do not suggest that everyone who missed school did not graduate, they just point to a

correlation between absenteeism and achievement. However, P41 interprets (actually, misinterprets) the research results on a very personal level, but then reflects on her son's experience, which corroborates the research.

Some participants made general comments about how other parents may feel:

Suppose so. Honestly don't think it will make a difference. Parents aren't looking that far into the future when they are sick. Its difficult because schools say – don't send your child to school if they are sick. But at the same time, you have to recognize if your child is making excuses. [P8, Y]

No, because I feel certain people don't respect education. [P15, N]

Families are resistant to research. They are skeptical. [P22, Y]

Maybe. Everybody thinks differently, some people might think "just 20 days" or "just high school. Everyone has an excuse or a reason. Maybe people think they can catch up later or go back to school at another time. [P35, Y]

As seen above, parents who drew general conclusions from the presented information were skeptical about the possibility of changing one's view of absenteeism. This is in sharp contrast to parents who showed personal interpretation and drew personal conclusions from the presented research.

4.3. **Barriers and facilitators to school attendance**

Noting trends from the first phase of the study, in which parents overwhelmingly reported absences due to illness, we sought to better understand the criteria or conditions under which parents made the decision to leave a child at home. We asked parents to reflect on experiences with their child staying home from school. Specifically, what was the hardest thing to manage when their child was home from school, and what kinds of things they tended to do with their child while at home with them (Questions 7, and 8 in the interview protocol. See Appendix B). The themes illustrated below reflect a myriad of factors related to the decision, on one hand relating to individual child characteristics and on the other, to the parents use of a heuristics or frameworks to make the decision. While the questions we asked were intended to get at the barriers and facilitators of attendance, most parents answers provided additional information not specifically related to barriers and facilitators.

4.3.1. When is a child too ill to attend school?

When commenting on how they determine whether their child is too sick to go to school, parents' responses followed an interesting dichotomy. Some parents relied on their child's word, while others relied almost solely on physical symptoms.

Symptoms and behaviours

Twenty six (48%) out of 54 parents mentioned looking at visible symptoms or changes in their child's behaviour when determining whether or not they were too ill to go to school. Specific symptoms included fever, throwing up/diarrhea, and cough. P2 exemplifies this:

> Take temperature. Make sure she is really sick because a little cough is ok but throwing up or fever means that she is really sick. [P2, N]

Some parents reported using children's behaviour as a sign of them being too ill to go to school. Parents also noted that relying on signs like their child reported feeling too tired to get out of bed, stomach aches, crying, feeling lethargic, or uncomfortable.

Trust

There were polarized opinions regarding relying on trust when deciding if a child was too ill to go to school. For example:

> If a child is waking up and usually they are happy to go to school but they don't want to, there is a reason for it: fear, bullying or they are sick. Check for fever. If he says he doesn't want to go to school, I won't force him. [P53, N/A]

> You have to take their temperature and check for their symptoms rather than just taking their word for it. Check for other reasons they might not want to be going to school. Maybe they didn't do their homework. [P48, N/A]

As noted in the two examples above, when students report feeling ill, it can be a sign of other issues. The two above examples also show the different ways parents approach the issue. In the first example, P53 discusses changes in eagerness to go to school as a sign that something else might be going on. This parent's potential causes are fear or bullying. P48 speculates that not wanting to go to school could stem from the

child not having done their homework. In both examples, the parents check for the child's symptoms as a way of deciding whether to send them to school.

Impact on other children

Seven parents also noted that children should be considered too ill to attend school if they are contagious.

> If she has a fever over 100, she has to stay home because of the other students. I work in health care, I know how fast it spreads. They don't wash their hands at school. [P47, NA]

> Look for weakness – if he is rubbing his eyes or crying-He's not going to school. If he's coughing and there's mucus he's not going to school. Don't want to get other kids sick. [P37, Y]

As shown in the examples above, a high fever and productive cough, parents think about the impact on other children when deciding whether to send their children to school.

External resources

One parent noted following daycare rules such as excluding from school programs children with fever or diarrhea, rash or a highly contagious condition. Another parent mentioned phoning HealthLink BC for advice or information. A few parents mentioned a practice of sending the students to school and having the school decide whether they are well enough to stay. For example:

> When I was in school, the school nurse would make the decisions about whether or not a child should stay in school or go home. [P22, Y].

Indeed, there are no written guidelines in the Surrey school district on when students should be excluded from school based on illness. While school attendance is compulsory by law, it appears that schools are leaving parents with the responsibility to decide when school can be missed.

4.3.2. Managing an absence

In trying to understand barriers and facilitators to attendance we asked parents what was the hardest thing to manage when their children stayed home from school for whatever reason (question 7 in the interview protocol. See Appendix B). We further

sought to understand what were the most common activities that children were engaged in when staying home due to an illness.

The 5 most common responses included:

1. Lay in bed (resting, laying on couch, sleep)

2. TV / video games

3. Reading (books)

4. Play

5. Cuddle (snuggles)

Parents also reported difficulties ranging from managing other children, dealing with work schedules, finding daycare, balancing school work and emotional tolls. One of the biggest challenges parents faced was getting their other children to school if one child was staying home sick. Transportation, especially where families have multiple children has large ramifications on all of the children's attendance habits. Other challenges included problematic behaviours, schedule arrangements, and parents feeling guilty for a variety of reasons.

Managing other children

Four parents reported a difficulty managing their other children when one of the children was home on a school day. For example:

Children fight. I have a baby at home so its lots to manage if they are home sick. [P31, N]

I have four children. Managing each of their needs is hard. [P36, Y]

A very specific challenge that parents reported was getting their other children to school when one child stays home. For example:

Getting the other 2 two school. If one gets sick, they all miss school. [P39, Y]

Getting one to school when they others are sick. [P42, Y]

I am on disability because of epilepsy so I'm a stay at home dad. Juggling to and from school is hard. If needed, someone could pick up child who isn't sick. [P28, Y]

Childcare and work schedules

Seven parents reported having a difficulty finding childcare and three parents said that managing their work and school schedules was challenging during their child's illness.

> Work and having them at home sick. Having to find someone to look after them so I don't miss work. [P48, N/A]

> I usually stay home from work and from school when my child is sick. I don't think I could leave my sick child at home with someone else taking care of them when they are sick. It's not difficult to stay home and miss work and school but it is inconvenient because I fall behind in school. There is nothing you can do when a child is sick at home. [P35, Y]

> It's hard to go to work, hard to find baby sitter. She wants me when she is sick so it's hard to get house stuff done. Also, hard to see her sick, and she misses a lot at school. [P54, N/A]

As exemplified by the above quotes, there is some tension between wanting to be home with their ill children and needing to balance work and school schedules.

School work

Four parents reported getting their children to focus on school work during an absence as the most challenging part to manage.

> Try to get her to do school work and not watch TV, she needs to do her homework and concentrate on school. [P17, N]

> Knowing what they missed. [P7, N]

Guilt

One parent reported feelings of guilt with respect to her decision to keep her child home from school.

> I am a stay at home mom so I can stay with her. I would feel bad though. Sometimes I would wake her and she'd be upset or I'd let her sleep in and feel bad about it. [P52, N/A]

Other difficulties

Four parents described difficulty managing the ill child. For example:

She is the most difficult thing to manage. I work from home so sometimes its difficult to get work done when she is home sick. [P1, N]

Five parents noted needing to manage the behaviour of the ill child and six parents reported dealing with boredom. For example:

When both are at home, they fight and that's difficult. If they get bored, they pick on each other. [P3, N]

She gets bored. She doesn't like staying home from school. [P30, Y]

She wants to play. She gets bored and wants to go to school, go out and play with friends. This year our whole house was sick for 3-4 months. [P47, N/A]

In total fifteen parents discussed the difficulty of managing their children's activities and behaviours during an absence from school, due to illness. Interesting to note that there are different challenges if the child is home alone as noted by P1, or if s/he is home with another sibling as noted by P3.

4.4. **Programs and Resources**

In order to understand how they perceived school programs in relation to aiding their children's attendance habits, parents were asked about programs they accessed or knew about and their suggestions for programs they heard about and would want to have in their child's school. This was captured by the last two questions (Questions 12 and 13; see Appendix B) in the interview in which participants were asked whether there were any programs that they heard of or used to help their children get to school on time, and whether they had any recommendations for programs that would be useful to have at their child's school.

4.4.1. Existing

When asked about programs families accessed or heard of, participants most frequently mentioned those related to addressing food insecurity. Nearly half (25) of all participants mentioned the breakfast program and 7 noted the lunch program. The

second largest theme, mentioned by 7 parents, was an after school fundamental movement skills program. Finally, only 4 participants mentioned knowing about or using the emergency pickup services offered through the outreach workers at the schools.

> Breakfast club is helpful. At breakfast club, they serve kids breakfast and make sure they get to school on time and that they have had something to eat before they start learning. [P35, Y]

> Breakfast program – we love it. Gets them to school on time. I don't always have time to feed all of my kids in the morning. [P36, Y]

4.4.2. Needed

Regarding the programs that families thought would be helpful, 12 participants expressed the need for more after-school programming, with 6 of them noting programs specifically focused on sports, arts and music.

> Help kids get to and from school [P10, N]

> Before and after school care [P14, N]

This sentiment was echoed by several other parents. Twelve parents stated that they do not access any school programs because of time constraints, no need for the services, or unsuccessful attempts.

4.5. **Summary**

In summary, parents have differing opinions on how absences affect learning. This is predicated on the value they place on schooling and the perceived benefit they see in education. For some parents, their perceptions of their child's attendance and school is created on the basis of their own experiences. For others, it is created from life circumstances, such as their current access to resources. Parents' decisions regarding keeping a child home from school is a complex one and is intertwined with scheduling challenges and other difficulties that sometimes makes it hard to get children to school. It was noted through several of the responses that there seems to be significant ambiguity and lack of direction on when a child is too ill to go to school. Parents also seemed to want to be more informed about things that could support their child's academic success.

Throughout the data analysis the hypothesis stated in Section 3.6 was revised to be more nuanced and express a deeper understanding of parents' perceptions about student absenteeism. The initial hypothesis was expressed as: parents' beliefs about the link between attendance and academic success are dependent on their understanding of the purpose of schooling. Following from the findings, the refined statement can be articulated as: parents' understanding of the purpose of schooling is only one of the factors that link attendance and academic success. Other factors include: managing multiple children, work and school schedules, difficulty with decision making when lacking concrete guidelines from the education system, as well as the personal characteristics and circumstances of the parent and the child.

Chapter 5.

Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Brief summary

This study examined parents' perceptions of chronic absenteeism and of the potential impact on early educational and social outcomes. It provided insight into the current programs that families find helpful and those that might be needed in their communities. The findings are summarized and presented by the research questions. This is followed by a discussion about the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with the study's contributions to research, policy and practice, suggestions for future research and a personal reflection.

5.2. Findings

In this section I present the summary of the findings according the research questions.

5.2.1. Research question 1: How do participating parents perceive the purpose of schooling?

Parents' perceptions about the benefits of schooling can be broken into three major categories: academic, social and routines. Parents for whom the benefit of schooling was academic cited specific skill acquisition such as reading, writing, and spelling. Additional responses included nurturing curiosity, and acquiring general knowledge. Parents for whom the greatest benefit of schooling was social can be further split into two categories: those that saw schooling as providing children with an opportunity to be in a social environment and those who saw schooling as an opportunity to learn social skills, such as making friends, getting along with others, and managing conflict. The final group of parents discussed the benefit of schooling as providing children the space to learn life skills such as gaining independence, following routines, and listening to authority figures.

5.2.2. Research question 2: At what point do parents believe that absences become a barrier to a student's learning?

Parents' understanding about when absences become a barrier to a child's learning followed an interesting pattern of responses. Some parents believed that there were specific conditions under which an absence could affect learning. Those conditions included underlying problems such as the child having a learning disability, or the student being previously behind his classmates in school achievement. Additional conditions had to do with frequency and quantity of the absences. For example, parents asserted that absences would become a barrier to learning only if they were consecutive, or only if they were above a specific number per week, per month or per year.

When considering the possible connection between student absences and student achievement, parents also addressed the issue of elective absences, that is, when parents choose to leave a child at home even when the child was not ill. There was a stark dichotomy in how parents felt about this practice, with about half of participants strongly discounting the practice and half defending it. Those parents in favour of leaving a child at home as a reward or for special time noted the importance of bonding, and responding to a child's emotional needs. Additionally, in the group of parents favouring the practice, there were those who stated a general positive position but offered that they themselves would not do it. Parents who were strongly opposed to the practice noted that special time could be spent in the evenings and weekends and that education was paramount. They added that it was the children's job to attend school.

5.2.3. Research question 3: What are the barriers and facilitators to consistent school attendance?

Specific issues that arose regarding barriers and facilitators to attendance included parents' decision making when leaving a sick child home, and managing absences. For the most part, parents relied on specific symptoms to decide if their child was too ill to go to school, while others talked about levels of comfort, and how contagious they perceived the child's illness to be. A subset of parents described using trust as a measure and there was disagreement about the extent to which a child's word

could be relied on. Some parents noted that when their children declared that they were ill, there was something else going on, such as missed homework or a social situation the child was trying to avoid.

The impact of parent's perceptions of the child's wellbeing on their decision to send them to school is consistent with the findings of Glaab, Brown and Daneman (2005). The authors reported that increased absences of students with diabetes was more related to parent's general feeling about attendance, than to the child's diagnosis or symptoms.

When discussing ways of managing student absences, parents tended to describe hardship in managing their schedules of work and school. Other challenges parents noted included dealing with the symptoms of the sickness, and managing (such as transporting to school) the healthy siblings of the sick child.

5.2.4. Research question 4: What programs or resources do parents cite as being available or necessary to assist in a given absence scenario or circumstance?

The most cited programs parents reported as aiding their children's attendance related to food security, namely breakfast club and the lunch program. Parents described the positive atmosphere the breakfast club provided as children transitioned to the school day. The second common response was an after school physical activity program. When asked which programs would parents need, most agreed on transportation assistance to and from school in addition to before and after school care.

5.3. Limitations

Participants for this study were recruited from a very specific population. I remind the reader that all the participants were parents of students from schools participating in the Surrey school district's Attendance Matters program. At the time of data collection, Attendance Matters operated in 15 inner city elementary schools, while there were 101 elementary schools in the District. As such, the reported results characterize only the population of the interviewees as experiences of parents living in inner city catchments can be different than those living in more affluent neighbourhoods. Additionally, the participants were recruited using existing relationships with school outreach workers and

on a volunteer basis. Furthermore, while there are lessons that can be drawn, qualitative research does not allow to generalize the results to a larger population.

5.4. **Data reliability**

There are two ways in which the data may be limited. Some of the interviews were conducted by inexperienced interviewers and despite training, some probing opportunities were missed. This resulted in less richness of the responses that could have given more depth of understanding of parents' perceptions about absenteeism.

Second, the interviews were not audio-recorded. Interviewer notes were made during the interview and summarized immediately following the interview. The decision not to record the interviews was intentional based on the vulnerability of the population, upon advice from the outreach workers. It was agreed between the research team and in consultation with the District's outreach workers that parents would be more comfortable and would be more willing to volunteer if the interviews were not recorded. While this posed a significant limitation for the results, it also provided the research team with access to some of the most vulnerable families in the District, and provided a stepping stone to further research on the issue.

5.5. **Contributions to research, practice and policy**

Despite the mentioned limitations, the findings do offer contributions to the work on chronic absenteeism in the realms of research, policy development and practice.

5.5.1. Contributions to research

The findings from this study build on Dalziel and Henthorne's (2005) report on parents' attitudes towards school attendance. While Dalziel and Henthorne's (2005) research focused on unexcused absences only, the data presented in this study did not distinguish between excused or unexcused absences.

Though formal comparison of parents of chronic absentees with parents of students with normal attendance is out of scope of my study, there appear to be little difference in the responses of the two groups regarding the value of their child's

attendance. In both groups, there were responses voicing strong importance of attendance as a contributing factor for success, as well as responses justifying absences not due to illness.

The findings suggest that there is oversimplification of the problem of chronic absenteeism in the literature. The literature presents chronically absent children and their families as a heterogeneous group with predictable risk to problem manifestation behaviours. Based on the findings of this study, there is a need to explore the wide range of complexities that exist within families, schools, and communities in relation to school attendance.

5.5.2. Contribution to policy

As was shown in Section 2.3, compulsory school legislation and regulations do not generally address student attendance or absenteeism. The findings of this study draw attention to questions about the consistency of policies on school attendance and absenteeism across provinces, districts, and schools

By adopting a district level definition of chronic absenteeism and an attendance policy, districts would be sending a clear message to parents and school staff about their expectations, easing communication between schools and families. These policies should be co-constructed in ways that respect the various stakeholders' perspectives. The policy, its associated regulations and practices would then be circulated to parents, district support staff, such as school counsellors, safe-school professionals, welcome centre staff, among others, and create a strategic vision for chronic absenteeism reduction. With chronic absenteeism reduction written into the policies of the district, board funds and special grants could be directly allocated to support strategies and innovative practices. There is also a need for recommendations for teachers and schools to provide parents activities when students miss school as well as programs that incentivize attendance.

5.5.3. Contribution to practice: Supporting student attendance

This study highlights the issue that parents (1) hold some essential misconceptions about the potential harm of absenteeism, (2) experience difficulties in

managing students and families when absences are unavoidable, and (3) food insecurity and transportation are issues that influence chronic absenteeism. These issues point to the parents' need for further information and support.

This research points to multiple ways for supporting healthy student attendance. For example, prevention efforts could be made as early as Kindergarten to inform parents about some of the harmful impacts of chronic absenteeism. Based on the findings, I wonder about the nature of the messages that parents and school staff receive about attendance and the support that can be provided to parents when absences are unavoidable. Additionally, findings from this study can be used to inform the development of a framework for channelling appropriate resources to support consistent attendance of all students. Finally, these findings could open honest communication between parents, school staff and administrators about challenges children and parents face, as often these challenges manifest themselves with absenteeism.

Even before students enter Kindergarten, information about the importance of consistent attendance could be shared at daycares, preschools and the District's early-years programs such as Ready, Set Learn and Welcome to Kindergarten. Information can also be shared with strong start facilitators that consistently interact with families with children under the age of five and form the basis of parent education programs both in school and in community. Information about consistent attendance as well as strategies for parents on how to access sources to support their children during absences, should be thought of as a "ready for school" strategy. Currently in BC daycare attendance is tied to subsidy, with insufficient attendance resulting in loss of eligibility. This kind of incentive for parents can be extended to other educational settings as well.

Practice implications don't end at the school level. There is a lot that service providers in out-of-school time settings can do to support the challenges reported by parents. Moreover, community services such as Options, and Immigration Services Society, can also address some of the challenges in their support of vulnerable families Finally, I see a need to broaden this issue in scope. There are high absenteeism rates in more affluent neighbourhoods, and the associated risk factors in those neighbourhoods are very different, yet no less pressing.

5.6. **Suggestions for further research**

At 21%, British Columbia, and the Lower Mainland specifically, faces the highest rate of childhood poverty in Canada (BC Child Poverty Report Card, 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, the participants noted both their use and continuing need for the food security initiatives. Future studies could use quasi-experimental designs to examine the relationship between schools as sites of food security and attendance in sites where food is provided versus those where it is not.

Additionally, research with a nuanced approach is needed to further the understanding of the complexity and interplay of factors influencing absenteeism. Future studies could certainly look at classification of absenteeism in rural vs. urban regions, by socio-economic and ethnic indicators utilizing critical race theory as an approach. Another set of studies could draw on the work exploring cultural capital and viewing absences as opportunities for cultural and social enrichment and inclusion rather tha as a deficit. Additionally, investigations into the development, implementation and evaluation of absenteeism reduction strategies across regions could help streamline efforts and reduce costs. Replication of successful interventions such as hand washing (Guinan, McGuckin & Ali, 2002) could be done in local contexts. Finally, the issue of attendance could be looked at in the context of out-of-school-time programming and investment. There is a potential link between the causes of absenteeism in school settings and remediation attempts through out-of-school-time programs.

If I could dream a bit bigger, I would have loved to conduct a participatory research design specifically with over represented populations with chronic absenteeism such as urban Aboriginal populations, children in care and refugees. Aboriginal students and children in care remain at a significant disadvantage academically despite ministry, and district efforts. The impacts of trauma and poverty are significant factors to this challenging reality.

5.7. **Looking back and looking forward**

When conducting the interviews for this study, one of the things that was really challenging for me was to acknowledge my own bias as a District employee and a parent. As a researcher, I had first to suppress and then to re-examine my own perspectives on school attendance. My initial perspective was developed from being a student myself and being imparted the values of school from my parents; then it was shaped by being a parent and by my knowledge and lived experience dealing with the education system. However, many of my conversations with other parent-friends occasionally reinforce what I have learned from the literature and from my study, and at times contradict it. What I came to appreciate is the differences in lived experiences that people go through.

If I could do this research again, I would likely change elements of the methodology such as ensure to audio recording of interviews, piloting the instrument before implementation, and extend the scope of the research to other demographical regions, both within the district and across the province.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I learned a lot about myself and the people around me both from a professional and personal standpoint. Professionally, I gained a tremendous level of empathy and gratitude towards the participants in the study. As a parent, I can appreciate how difficult it is to open-up to a stranger about your daily struggles. The level of confidence these parents entrusted in me is humbling and rewarding. I have also come to appreciate the work of Community-Schools Partnership department whose tireless work to enhance the lives of children and families is ground-breaking. For me, as a District professional, this research has meant growth in the meaning I place on words, how careful I now am to fully listen and understand someone before offering advice and support, and how I see myself as part of a large system that truly puts children first.

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Appendix A.

Detailed Participant Information

Participant ID	Child's Grade:	School:	Aboriginal status	Chronically absent? Y/N	Case load Y/N
p1	2	HJ	No	No	No
p2	3	HJ	No	No	No
p3	K	HJ	No	No	No
p4	4	HJ	No	No	No
p5	1	GV	No	No	No
p6	K ,2	GV	No	No	No
p7	K, 1	GV	Yes	No	No
p8	2	GV	No	Yes	No
p9	1	GV	No	Yes	No
P10			No	No	No
p11	K, 2	MS	No	No	No
p12	1	HO	No	No	No
p13	K, 2	FS	No	No	No
p14	3	BH	No	No	No
p15	1	BH	No	No	No
p16	1	FS	No	No	No
p17	K	PC	Yes	No	No
p18	1, 3, 5	FC	Yes	No	No
p19	1	WK	Yes	No	No
p20	1	WK	Yes	No	No
p21	3	MS	No	Yes	No
p22	2	KW	No	Yes	No
p23	1	MS	No	Yes	No
p24	K, 3	WK	No		No
p25	2	WK	No		No
p26	1	HJ	No	No	Yes
p27	4	BR	No	Yes	Yes
p28	2	HJ	No	Yes	Yes
p29	3	GV	No	Yes	Yes
p30	3	HJ	Yes	Yes	Yes
p31	1, 3	LS	No	No	Yes
p32	2	BR	No	No	Yes
p33	1	FS	Yes	No	Yes
p34	2	BR	No	Yes	Yes
p35	1	PC	No	Yes	Yes
p36	3	PC	No	Yes	Yes

Participant ID	Child's Grade:	School:	Aboriginal status	Chronically absent? Y/N	Case load Y/N
p37	K	FS	No	Yes	Yes
p38	2	BH	No	Yes	Yes
p39	K, 2, 3	BR	No	Yes	Yes
p40	1, 5	LS	No	Yes	Yes
p41	K, 1, 3	PC	Yes	Yes	Yes
p42	1, 2	FS	Yes	Yes	Yes
p43	3	BH	Yes	Yes	Yes
p44	1	WK	Yes	Yes	Yes
p45	1, 3	LS	Yes	Yes	Yes
p46	2	WK	Yes	Yes	Yes
p47	1	HJ	No	Yes	Yes
p48	4	KW	No	Yes	Yes
p49	2	GV	No	Yes	Yes
p50	k	LS		Yes	Yes
p51	1	BH		Yes	Yes
p52	K	LS		Yes	Yes
p53	1	OY		Yes	Yes
p54	1	OY		Yes	Yes

Appendix B.

Interview protocol

1. What is your child's favourite book?

2. What is your child's favourite tv show?

3. What is your favourite activity to do with your child?

4. What is your favourite family activity?

5. There are lots of reasons that kids go to school. What do you think are some of the purposes behind schooling at this age?

6. For your family, what do you believe are the benefits of (kindergarten/Grade 1/Grade2/Grade 3)?

7. What is the most difficult thing to manage when your child is absent from school? (Eg. daycare, time off work, other children, etc)?

8. What kinds of things do you do with your child when he/she stays home?

9. When we talked to parents about why their child/ren were absent from school, many said that it was because their child was sick. What advice would you give a friend who asked you how to decide if her child was too sick to go to school?

10. Several parents have mentioned to us that they will keep a child home from school as a reward or to spend special time with that child. What are your thoughts on this?

11. At what point do you believe that missing school might become a barrier to a student's learning? (number of days or percentage of the year)

12. There is research that shows that even for students who are "school ready", missing just 20 days of school each year in kindergarten through 2nd grades leads to significant gaps in achievement starting in grade 3. There is also evidence that students who miss more than 10% of the school year in k-3 are more likely to drop out of high school and are less likely to go on to college or university. Do you think knowing this information would change how people think about attendance in the early grades?

13. Are there any programs that you have heard of or that your family uses to help you get your child to attend school on time? (If so, what programs?)

14. Do you have any recommendations or programs that you have heard of that you think would be useful to have at your school?

15. Is there anything you would like to share with me that I haven't asked about?

Appendix C.   Informed consent

Attendance Matters

Researcher:

Michelle Nilson

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand the barriers and facilitators of school attendance in K-3 students. We are working in a partnership project with the Surrey School District and SFU.

You have been invited to participate in this study as your role as a parent of a K-3 student in one of the participating schools. As the parent, I am interested in learning about your perceptions of the purpose of schooling in the early years, the barriers to attendance that you've observed, and about any programs that might be helpful to your family.

Study procedures:

You are being invited to participate in this study, which would involve being interviewed 1 time for approximately 20-30 minutes.

Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary, and it will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. You have the right not to answer any question and to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Risks to participant:

Your refusal to participate will have no adverse affects on your role as a parent with this school, or your child's education at the school in any way.

There are minimal risks to you as a participant in this project. It is anticipated that there are no risks beyond those of every day life.

The benefits of this study:

Potential benefits of this study to participants are that they will learn more about the impact of absences on student achievement and will be able to indirectly inform the development and improvement of existing attendance programs. Copies of the reports are available to all participants upon request.

Confidentiality

Interviews with permission of the participant may be audio recorded. All information gathered from the interview will be coded and all personal identifiers will be removed, which assures your confidentiality to the full extent permitted by law.

The data will be kept in a locked office and password protected on a computer hard drive. Only I, Dr. Michelle Nilson, will have access to the data. All personal identifiers will be removed from data. The anonymized data set may be shared with graduate students who are interested in using the data for their theses or dissertations.

Renumeration/Compensation

For participating in this study, you will be given a small gift of appreciation, a $25 gift card.

Contact for information about the study:

You may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its

completion by contacting Dr. Michelle Nilson at […]@sfu.ca

If you have any questions about this project, please contact me at (778)[…] or […]@sfu.ca

Contact for concerns about the study:

If you have any concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics via e-mail dore@sfu.ca or phone 778-782-6593.

Many thanks for your assistance, Michelle Nilson

Attendance Matters

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to you or your child's education.

Your signature below indicated that you have received a copy of this consent form for your records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____ Name (Signature)

_____ Name (Print)

_____ Date