# An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school

by

Andrew L. Kipp

B.S., Kansas State University, 2014
M.S., Pittsburg State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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Manhattan, Kansas

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# Abstract

Student absenteeism is a persistent issue in education and is harmful to both the school and the absentee student. One approach to improving student absenteeism is targeting contextual factors within the learning environment. The study uniquely employs an ecological agency approach to understanding absenteeism within the suburban, Kansas school context. The ecological agency theoretical framework explores the person's personal history, aspirations, and environmental conditions to better understand potential outlets or restrictions to their intended action. Using a case study methodology in a suburban, Kansas school context during the 2020-2021 school year, the study captures the decision-making of four high school absentee students using semi-structured interviews, drawings, and concept maps. The findings reveal that peer socialization opportunities, methods of instruction, shifts in cultural beliefs due to COVID-19, manifestations of anxiety and lack of space to escape their anxiety, social media bullying, and the inability to receive academic tutoring motivated the participants' daily decision to either attend or miss school during the 2020-2021 school year. The findings provide a basis to improve several institutional and classroom practices. These practices include more student-led instruction and less teacher-led instruction in both in-person and remote learning environments, promoting socialization through classroom collaboration and clubs based on emerging student interests, reducing instances of bullying through prosocial education, safe spaces for students to escape the classroom to manage their anxiety, and more opportunities for one-on-one tutoring to improve grades. The study illustrates an example of using the ecological agency approach to better understand the personal and environmental factors that lead to absenteeism. The study also informs educational policy and classroom practice to better promote student attendance. Further research should investigate other school contexts using the ecological agency theoretical

framework to better understand the influence of the school environment and personal contextual factors upon student absenteeism.

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Major Professor
Dr. J. Spencer Clark

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Finally, a big thank you to you, the reader. I hope you take away something meaningful from my research and help us make the world of education a better place.

# Dedication

To everyone who helped me.

Thank you.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## My/Our history with student absenteeism

Student absenteeism is a persistent issue in education, and my research endeavors to understand student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school context through the ecological agency framework. To illustrate the problem of student absenteeism and the current approach to countering student absenteeism, I present my narrative in relation to my experiences with student absenteeism as a high school senior in 2010 and later as a chemistry educator at Gardner Edgerton High School in 2015. Bhattacharya (2009), Holman Jones et al. (2013), Houghton (2013), and Noble and Smith (2015) suggest presenting my narrative and experiences to illustrate any biases and subjectivity within my research. I present my perspective and privilege because subjectivity is always present in every part of my writing. Rather than hide it, I present these experiences through my writing and intentionally offer them to you, the reader, early in my dissertation to be completely transparent with my positionality. My recollection also offers an evocative example to illustrate the problem of student absenteeism and the current approach to improving attendance because I believe that my high school absentee experiences parallel the United States' history with student absenteeism.

***

Andrew Kipp (2010, reflection): *A choir of groans emanate from my peers and me.*

*"Yes, we are going to continue reading a Midsummer Night's Dream," remarks my growingly irritated teacher. I lazily open my copy of the comedy and flip to Act 3, Scene 1. My urgency increases as the teacher starts asking for volunteers to read the parts. I flip through the book to*

*find a character called Cobweb. I wince at the sight of the name but notice the two sentences I have to say. I swiftly volunteer for the role of Cobweb.*

*I get it.*

*Nice.*

*"Are we all met?" my classmate begins with an over-the-top reading that would make a Disney Channel character blush.*

*"Pat, pat; and here's a mar-val," another classmate murmurs.*

*"mar-VAIL," interrupts my teacher.*

*"Oh, marvail's convenient place for our rehearsal this green plot shall be our stage this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house, and we will do it action as we willdoitbefortheDuke," my classmate finishes in a flurry.*

*A collective chuckle emerges from the class.*

*"Hey!" Our teacher glares towards us with his right fist already clinched. He clears his throat and takes over reading the characters in a monotonous tone.*

*This continues for some time. My mind drifts into an adolescent abyss as my right leg shakes mildly.*

*"I have no idea what's going on. I didn't do the homework. Mom's gonna be pissed."*

*"Getting kinda hungry."*

*“Wonder if she thinks I’m cute.”*

*“Wish I had more friends in this class. Wait, what’s that smell? Is it me? Did I put on deodorant today? Yeah, think so. Oh my God, he is going to read to us for the majority of class again? Just like last year. A stark change from physics last block. At least I can chill.”*

*An aggressive buzz interrupts my scattered thoughts. I slide my hand into my pocket and find my Nokia e90 Communicator with stealth and plop it onto my open book.*

*“Smooth,” I think to myself.*

*I stop the tapping with my Kevin Garrett shoes and check the text. It’s Ridge.*

*“Lunch?” the message reads.*

*The sides of my lips curl at the thought of El Charro. My stomach also growls in approval. At this point, the teacher finally gave us control of reading again.*

*“A calendar, a calendar! Look in the ALMANAC! Find out MOONSHINE, fiiiind out moonshine!” my first classmate bellows and gestures wildly.*

*…*

*My head now seconds the motion of going to El Charro.*

*“Cool. Downstairs bathroom in 5?” I text back as a handful of my classmates continue reading the play.*

*My leg shaking resumes and gradually increases as I stare intently at my phone.*

*Moments later I see: "Cool."*

*"Now, what's the plan?" I ask myself softly. "He always lets us go to the bathroom. Never checks on us. Be discrete? Nah, that's not me anymore. Maybe put on a little show. Make it about me? I like that. And do what I want? Doubly good!"*

*"I can also be free from here. Free from pressure."*

*"Okay."*

*"It's time."*

*I stand up abruptly, drawing everyone's eyes on me, and roar with a smile on my face:*

*"I need to go poop!"*

*My male peers, some distance friends, and others simply peers, cackle at the prospect of performing a bowel movement. Though, they are also aware of what I am about to do too. The girl I was thinking about glances at me expressing annoyance and apathy.*

*The air is still for a moment before an exasperated sigh is released.*

*"Go. And be back in five."*

*I dash to the door and burst through it. I glide down the empty hallway as I make my way to the bathroom. I find that Ridge has already found me.*

*"Is Chris coming?" I inquire.*

*"Nah, couldn't get out," Ridge replies.*

*“His loss,” I chuckle.*

*We march towards the front doors and exit the west-side of the building where the library is overlooking the entrance. We emerge into the basking warm humidity of a cloudless, sunny March day. As we make our way to my F-150 in the senior parking lot. My phone chirps. As I am turning on the truck, I check my phone to see if Chris finally made the right decision.*

*Nope.*

*It is the high school librarian.*

*Who is also my Mom.*

*I check it and start reading it.*

*“WHAT ARE YOU DOING LEAVING AGAIN? I DO. . .”*

*I hear Ridge laugh, and I pocket my phone quickly as I feel the uncomfortable warmth permeate my body. Second time today after getting an answer wrong in physics.*

*It is a quiet ride to El Charro with thoughts re-emerging from this morning and racing through my head. A battle of thoughts clash inside the battleground of my brain.*

*“What are you doing?”*

*“You let her down again.”*

*“You are not Peter. Mom was never disappointed with her older son.”*

*“Perfect Peter…”*

*"Remember when your fifth-grade teacher called you a perfectionist? What happened to you?"*

*"Certainly not perfect now."*

*"You still feel the need to be perfect. Flawless. Every time."*

*"It was only Shakespeare."*

*"They never cared anyway."*

*"Or do they?"*

*"Ridge cares."*

*"Other friends care."*

*"This is who I am now; can't show them anything else."*

*"Have to hide behind this mask I made."*

*"Look, you're doing what you want when you want."*

*"I'mma making MY choices now."*

*"This DOES feel good, yeah?"*

*"And WHO is going to stop you?"*

*"You are free!"*

*"You are free!"*

*"You are free…"*

*"You are free…"*

*"Youarefreeyouarefreeyouarefreeyouarefree…"*

*"Are you free?"*

*We quietly enter the restaurant and a short time later get the food we ordered.*

*I don't feel much for talking right now.*

*We eat in a frenzy and approach the counter to pay. As we are paying, Ridge states "I think the secretary is over there."*

*"Oh shit," I sigh.*

*We dash out of the restaurant and climb back into the truck.*

*"Well, time to head back to class," Ridge remarks dryly.*

***

Student absenteeism is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days during a school year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). During my high school career in the late 2000s, I frequently engaged in absenteeism. This behavior is not uncommon among high school students. For example, one in six students were absent at least 15 or more days during the 2015-2016 school year in the United States (Kearney et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, in the United States, school attendance is required, and schools are held accountable for student attendance (United States Department of Education, 2002).

In the 19th century, United States schools started requiring school attendance to reduce the volume of children in the workforce (Gleich-Bope, 2014; Katz, 1976; Trujillo, 2006). Specifically, school attendance laws were first adopted by Massachusetts in 1852; and, by 1918, all states had some school attendance laws requiring children to attend school (Gleich-Bope, 2014; Katz, 1976; Trujillo, 2006). Compulsory education (i.e., state-mandated education) was a debated topic throughout the 20th century when juxtaposed with racial and cultural issues (e.g., southern schools repealing compulsory education to resist racial integration) (Katz, 1976). With the shift to mandatory schooling, student absenteeism started to cause new issues to both schools and absentee students (Broadwin, 1932).

During the shift from voluntary to compulsory education, student attendance evolved into an important measurement to schools (Hutt, 2018). Firstly, schools were given incentives for quality attendance which led schools to manipulate attendance records in the most flattering way possible to receive the incentives (Hutt, 2018). Secondly, attendance was used as a measurement for academic success and achievement, which again, encouraged schools to manipulate their attendance records to present itself to the public in a positive manner (Hutt, 2018). Therefore, school attendance evolved into an important measurement for schools because lower student attendance harmed the school.

Additionally, student absenteeism is not only damaging to the school but also to the student. There are several negative short- and long-term consequences associated with student absenteeism. These undesirable and dangerous outcomes were observed throughout the 20th century when compulsory education became the norm for schools. For example, Dunham and Knauer (1954) investigated delinquency behaviors (e.g., absenteeism) in youth populations and concluded that students with delinquency behaviors had legal issues throughout their lives.

Contemporary research in student absenteeism expands upon the specific negative short- and long-term outcomes related to student absenteeism. Gottfried (2010) and Gottfried (2014) discussed several immediate outcomes of student absenteeism. Gottfried (2010) and Gottfried (2014) described that absenteeism led to lower math, reading, and overall academic achievement and performance, lower educational engagement, and decreased social engagement. Attendance Works (2017) shared how attendance influenced academic performance and achievement. Specifically, school attendance helped improve language skills and prepared students for college or a career by the end of high school (Attendance Works, 2017).

There are also several negative long-term outcomes associated with student absenteeism. Garry (1996) described that absenteeism led to delinquency, criminal activity, dropping out, drug usage, and violence. Hibbett and Fogelman (1990) discussed more negative long-term outcomes (e.g., an increased likelihood to experience marital breakdown by age 23, more prone to becoming heavy smokers, or more prone to depression). Student absenteeism also perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline by exposing students to early criminalization and leading to lifelong legal issues (Mallett, 2016).

Finally, as education has become an expectation for the child - partially due to the shift from humanistic philosophies (i.e., preparation exclusively for academia) to social efficiency philosophies (i.e., preparation for career) - the attendance rate has steadily increased from 59% daily school attendance rate from the 1869-1870 school year to the 90% daily school attendance rate from the 1979-1980 school year (Kliebard, 2004; Snyder, 1993). However, the largest increases primarily occurred between the 1860s to the 1930s (Snyder, 1993). These increases were attributed to fewer students taking time off for work and less frequent illnesses due to more

advanced healthcare and medicine (Snyder, 1993). Recently, Maynard et al. (2017) investigated student absenteeism and observed that absenteeism rates remained stagnant between 2002-2014.

Since the formation of compulsory schooling, student absenteeism has been an issue. Student absenteeism negatively affects both the absentee student and school. The failure to improve school attendance from 2002-2014 magnifies the issue of absenteeism.

I contributed to this lack of improvement during the 2002–2014 time frame, and with United States schools requiring attendance, my absence at school did not go unnoticed.

## Solutions to solving student absenteeism

***

Andrew Kipp (2010, reflection): *As Ridge and I entered the vice principal's office the next day, we were all giggles. Moments before, we were telling our escapades to our friends who were in band class right before we got called into the office. I felt pretty good about myself which was quite unusual for the time. The tone definitely shifted as we entered the vice principal's office. This was not our first time here.*

*And he knew it.*

*In less than a minute of "discussion," we got a week's worth of in-school suspension for skipping during English. We even returned for the next period.*

*It did not matter.*

***

My school's response to my absenteeism was typical for schools in the late 2000s: harsh, swift punishment for any transgressions. However, there were also times when we skipped, and the following day, we were not called down to the office. When those days happened, it felt like

we got away with it. We received the benefits of absenteeism without any response from the environment, so we continued to engage in absenteeism. Both experiences align with the historical response to absenteeism in schools.

Schools historically either ignored student absenteeism or forced their students to drop out of school (Trujillo, 2006). Trujillo (2006) shared "these [compulsory educational] laws were ineffective in that they were seldom enforced and relied on the 'push out' method of school policy enforcement, rather than addressing the underlying issues of truancy and developing ways to keep students in school" (p.70). Moreover, starting in the 1990s, schools started adopting "zero tolerance" policies (i.e., swift, harsh punishments to change student behavior) as a method to reduce absenteeism (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero tolerance policies do not improve student behavior, school climate, or school safety (Amemiya et al., 2020; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Moreover, zero tolerance policies are harmful to the student by creating negative unintended consequences (e.g., arrest or incarceration) (Amemiya et al., 2020; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Thus, some schools using these policies are creating unfavorable conditions that perpetuate absenteeism.

My school was a zero tolerance school; and thus, I received a week's worth of in-school suspension. However, zero tolerance was not the only strategy utilized in an attempt to change my absentee behaviors.

***

Andrew Kipp (2010, reflection): *I intentionally drove around after school. I did not want to go home and see Mom. I am sure she heard that I received a week's worth of in-school suspension.*

*After some time, I did finally return home to confront Mom. I was prepared for the next round of tongue lashings.*

*However, that's not what happened when I returned from school. I did get pulled to the side again, but unlike my other instances of receiving detentions for skipping school, I did not get yelled at. Rather, she told me she was worried about me, my future, my series of poor decisions, and my changing behavior. She told me the embarrassment that she felt every time the assistant principal went to the library to tell her about my absenteeism and subsequent discipline.*

*It made me sad.*

*It made me mad at myself.*

*But,*

*It started a shift in my perception of myself, my actions, and my agency.*

*Together, we collaborated on what we can do to change my absentee behaviors.*

*We talked about the pressure to perform well in school, and how it bothered me that I was always trying to meet my brother's expectations. We further discussed the opportunity to spend more time with friends outside of school along with the need to attend school to prepare myself for college.*

*To this day, since our conversation in 2010, I have not intentionally skipped any classes.*

***

In contemporary student absenteeism research, educators and interested stakeholders are also attempting to improve attendance but not through apathy or punitive measures. Rather, contemporary researchers and educators are targeting and resolving contextual factors that lead to school absenteeism or implementing conditions that promote school attendance (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearney, 2003; Kearney, 2008a; Trujillo, 2006). By resolving the contextual

factors motivating students to engage in absenteeism, students are more likely to attend school (Kearney, 2008a; Kim & Streeter, 2016). For example, Response to Intervention (RtI) is an approach that targets student absenteeism by resolving contextual factors found in the student's life (Kim & Streeter, 2016). Specifically, a group of educators and administrators work together to learn about the student, identify contextual factors, and target the contextual factors through interventions (Kim & Streeter, 2016). By resolving these motivators, student attendance may improve (Kim & Streeter, 2016).

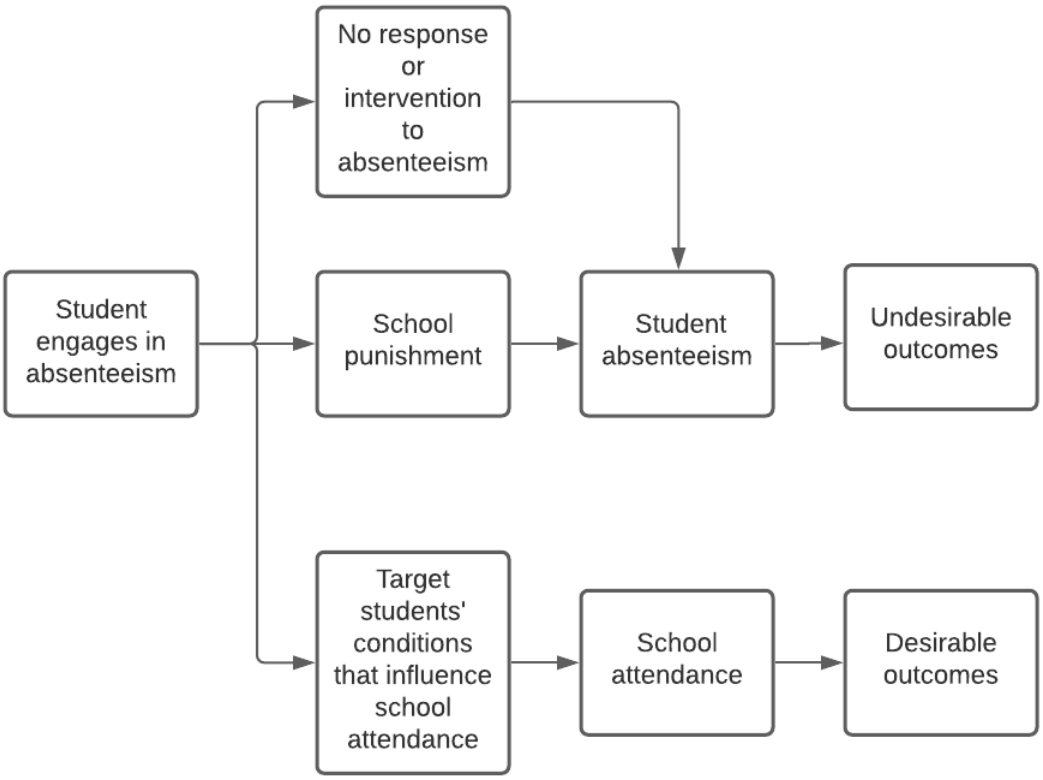
I recalled my conversation with Mom because it was a turning point with my absentee behaviors. As I demonstrated in my initial recollection at the start of the chapter, I had anxieties related to fitting in and living up to the expectations surrounding me. There were also classes where I believed I was not being challenged. I also felt a disconnection between the class material and my own world; it did not feel relevant to me. I skipped those classes as demonstrated in my recollection. These contextual factors led me to engage in absenteeism despite the many privileges and affordances that I had in my life. Additionally, when my mother started expressing herself, I felt the need to reciprocate and share my own feelings. Simply put, I wanted to fit in, be my own person, and not feel overwhelming stress. I also wanted meaningful classes. My conversation with my mother led to a shift within myself and my environment.

I started to make excuses for not engaging in absenteeism with my friends. In turn, they also stopped skipping as well. I also had more freedoms when it came to hanging out with friends outside of school; my family allowed me to spend more time with my friends. While the classwork did not change, I knew that college was on the horizon, and I would have more choice and agency over the classes that I could take in college. My mindset changed toward my classes that I found dull and uninspiring. These small, but not insignificant changes, to myself and my

environment made a long lasting shift in my life when it came to engaging in absenteeism. My mother did what the scholars above suggested: she identified and resolved my contextual factors leading to my absentee behaviors through new conditions in my environment (e.g., spending more time with friends). My mindset also changed with my classwork; I focused on performing well to provide myself an opportunity to receive a quality college education.

My experiences mirror contemporary research through illustrating the different methods that school use to resolve student absenteeism. These are summarized in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1 Possible outcomes of student absenteeism**




Based on these three pathways, the most desirable outcome (i.e., improved attendance) is targeting the absentee student's needs (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kim & Streeter, 2016; Shores & Chester, 2009). With punishment and apathy towards absenteeism being ineffective (Amemiya et al., 2020; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008;

Kearney, 2008a), the best course of action would be to continue researching contextual factors to decrease student absenteeism and improve attendance.

## Gaps in student absenteeism research

***

Andrew Kipp (2015, reflection): *It is a mild December afternoon, and I am at the front door greeting my students. We are nearing winter break in my second year of teaching chemistry at Gardner Edgerton High School when I notice a student enter my class who is not normally there.*

*I greet him like any other student.*

*But he does not say anything back.*

*Maybe he didn't hear me?*

*Class goes by without issue, but interestingly, this student does not leave when the other students leave. So, I approach him.*

*He asks, "Can I get my grade up? I'm failing."*

*I check and see that he is, in fact, failing, by about 5 percentage points.*

*I was told during my undergraduate to remain consistent for class management. Otherwise, the students will run you over.*

*I refuse. "No," I said plainly.*

*He pleads his case. He said that if he failed, he would go to the alternative school and just cheat his way through it.*

*I remain steadfast and ignore his argument. After all, he was rarely in my class. There should be consequences for his behavior – just like I got.*

*He continues with his challenges.*

*Always working.*

*Family problems.*

*Couldn't focus on class.*

*Too far behind to catch up.*

*And on…*

*And on…*

*"Well… He is* ***NOT*** *going to bullshit me," I think to myself.*

*I stand my ground.*

*And finally, he stops talking and leaves.*

*The teacher across the hall was listening to the commotion because I had an open-door policy. He praises me for remaining steadfast with* ***those types of kids.***

*"I did the right thing," I think to myself.*

*And I do not see him again.*

. . .

Andrew Kipp (2021, reflection): *Fast-forward to now.*

*This student.*

*Is in jail.*

. . .

. . .

. . .

*I'm sorry.*

. . .

***

Contemporary research in student absenteeism understands the problem of absenteeism as multifaceted (Kearney, 2008a). Specifically, there are several broad categories that conceptualize the interplay of factors motivating absentee behaviors in students (Kearney, 2008a). These factors are child, parent, family, peer, school, and community. The failure to resolve the factors in each of these categories may result in continued or sustained absenteeism (Kearney, 2008a). The literature review investigates the conditions leading to absenteeism in each category (see Chapter 2). During the review of literature, there are two notable gaps in research. The first gap in research is the lack of absenteeism research specifically in suburban, Kansas schools. The second gap in research is the lack of research investigating absenteeism through an ecological agency approach. Both arguments are briefly presented here but are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

When surveying the literature, there is minimal evidence that investigates absenteeism in the suburban, Kansas school context. Both Kansas and suburban schools have issues with school absenteeism. Kansas schools are ill-equipped to improve the state's declining attendance rate (Chang et al., 2018; Kansas Association of School Boards, 2017). Suburban schools also have declining attendance (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates, 2016). Moreover, suburban schools have issues of inequity present in their schools which may lead to absenteeism (and magnified punishment for absenteeism) for minority and underrepresented populations (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates, 2016). The two school contexts together compound these issues. Despite being problematic, absenteeism in suburban, Kansas schools has not been addressed in research. This dissertation represents one attempt to learn about the potential conditions leading to student absenteeism within the suburban, Kansas school context.

Beyond the school context, the literature review reveals a small, but growing, group of studies using qualitative research approaches to understand student absenteeism. However, the majority of student absenteeism research is still situated in quantitative research. Qualitative research approaches may be a more appropriate approach to understanding absenteeism due to its ability to complexify and understand multifaceted issues (Holman Jones et al., 2013).

An ecological agency approach may be another effective qualitative approach to understanding student absenteeism. Ecological agency is a theoretical framework that conceptualizes human decision-making (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Ecological agency understands that the conditions in the person's history and future aspirations, along with beliefs, policies, and practices found in the person's environment, influence a person's decision-making (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Human actions that occur in an environment are referred to as the "achievement-of-agency" or "achieving agency"

because the action occurs by *means of* an environment rather than *in* an environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In other words, the environment promotes or restricts particular actions, and the person either accepts or rejects these environmental conditions when also considering their personal conditions (i.e., personal history and future aspirations) (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

While this interpretation of agency complexifies the conceptualization of the person's agency, ecological agency is useful for understanding the "hidden" personal and environmental influences that lead to a person's action. For example, in the realm of educational research, ecological agency has been primarily used to conceptualize teachers' decision-making and understanding of their environment during ongoing curricular and instructional changes (e.g., Balgopal, 2020; Biesta et al., 2015; Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Imants et al., 2013; Robinson, 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017). The ecological agency framework deepens the understanding of teachers' decision-making through its unique conceptualization of decision-making and assists ongoing research by understanding how the environment motivates or inhibits teachers' daily actions.

While the ecological agency theoretical framework has been theorized with understanding absenteeism (Kipp & Clark, 2021), it has not been implemented in any research studies. In this interpretation, the student considers their options based on the environmental and personal conditions and accepts or rejects their options for school attendance. It is the student's understanding of their personal and environmental conditions that promote or restrict their intended action. The decision of school attendance or absenteeism is achieved within the student's environment as a response to the student's conceptualization of their personal and environmental conditions.

More rigorously, the framework interprets the action of absenteeism as agency achieved through absenteeism (or the achievement- of-agency through absenteeism) and the action of school attendance as agency achieved through school attendance (or the achievement-of-agency through school attendance) (Kipp & Clark, 2021). Implementing the ecological agency theoretical framework captures the absentee student's conceptualization of their environmental and personal conditions, and the interplay between these conditions which influence the absentee student's daily decision to attend or miss school. My dissertation is the first study that utilizes an ecological agency model and studies the achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism.

## The Study

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Andrew Kipp (2021, reflection): *Each year, I receive a new group of students. These students are multi-faceted and have unique problems. I want to provide conditions that improve attendance and reduce absenteeism just like my teachers and parents did with me.*

*But,*

*I must learn about my students, and what conditions lead them to either achieve their agency through absenteeism or school attendance.*

*Then,*

*I can help them.*

*Rather than harm.*

***

**Table 1.1 The Study**

| Dimension of Interest | Approach |
|---|---|
| Research purpose | The research purpose is to understand the achievement-of-agency through either absenteeism or school attendance. |
| Research questions | 1. Why do absentee students achieve agency through absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school?<br>2. Why do absentee students achieve agency through school attendance in a suburban, Kansas school? |
| Participants | Four Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry students who engaged in absenteeism during the 2020-2021 school year |
| Data collection procedures | Interviews, relational maps, and drawings |
| Data analysis | Thematic analysis |
| Trustworthiness | Prolonged engagements, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, audit trail, reflexivity, and thick descriptions |
| Results | A descriptive illustration of the participants' decision-making in relation to their daily decision to attend or miss school. |
| Discussion | The discussion adds to previous student absenteeism research by illustrating or introducing contextual factors that influence school attendance behaviors. |
| Discussion: Theoretical framework analysis | The theoretical framework dissects the study's results to identify the environmental conditions influencing the participants' daily decision to attend or miss school and how the environment shifts the participants decision from attending school to absenteeism (or vice versa). |
| Implications | The implications provide suggestions to modify the school environment through new policies, practices, beliefs, and rules to improve student attendance. |

The introduction demonstrates that student absenteeism is a historical and contemporary issue and is harmful to both the school and student. One research approach is understanding the contextual factors that influence student attendance. Chapter 2 presents student absenteeism

literature and the current understanding of contextual factors influencing student attendance. Chapter 2 also reveals the gaps of literature (i.e., lack of research within the suburban, Kansas school context and viewing student absenteeism through an ecological agency approach). Chapter 2 argues for the need to research these gaps. Finally, Chapter 2 elaborates on the ecological agency theoretical framework. The research questions address the two deficiencies found in research; they are:

1. Why do absentee students achieve agency through absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school?
2. Why do absentee students achieve agency through school attendance in a suburban, Kansas school?

Next, in Chapter 3, I discuss the case study methodology that is used for the study. Specifically, I talk about the epistemological assumptions, case of interest, participants and setting, data collection and analysis methods, strategies for trustworthiness and rigor, and limitations. Chapter 4 illustrates the conditions and experiences leading the participants to engage in school attendance or absenteeism. Chapter 5 juxtaposes my findings with previous literature to clarify how my study builds upon student absenteeism research. Chapter 5 also utilizes the ecological agency theoretical framework to analyze how the everchanging school environment modifies the participants' decision to attend or miss school. The use of the ecological agency theoretical framework presents school and classroom policies and beliefs that are harmful toward student attendance. The implications section in Chapter 5 discusses potential changes to the school and classroom to promote school attendance. Finally, Chapter 5 presents outlets for future research.

***

Andrew Kipp (2021, reflection): *I engaged in absenteeism.*

*But a group of people helped me resolve my conditions that led to my absenteeism and gave me conditions to help me come to school again.*

. . .

*Maybe this study can help others who were like me so I can help,*

*and not harm,*

*these students.*

***

## Definition of key and relevant terms

Achievement-of-agency: An action manifested from a person's understanding of their personal and environmental conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Achievement-of-agency through absenteeism: The decision to engage in absenteeism based on the person's understanding of their environmental and personal conditions (Kipp & Clark, 2021).

Achievement-of agency through school attendance: The decision to attend school based on the person's understanding of their environmental and personal conditions (Kipp & Clark, 2021).

Agentic orientation: The interplay of past, present, future, and environmental conditions influencing human action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agentic orientation can be observed when reflecting upon their actions, history, aspirations, and environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Contextual factor: A factor that may increase or decrease rates of attendance (Kearney, 2008a; Kim & Streeter, 2016). Similar terms include influential, ecological, or risk factors.

Ecological agency: The capacity to act based on personal (i.e., past history and future aspirations) and environmental conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Gardner Edgerton High School: A suburban high school in Gardner, Kansas.

Intentionality: An action plan to bring a different future (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

School refusal: Refers to anxiety-based absenteeism where students choose not to go to school due to the student's mental health needs (Kearney, 2008b).

School refusal behavior: Students choose to not attend school (Kearney 2001, as cited in Kearney et al., 2004).

Student absenteeism: Students who miss 10% or more of school days in a school year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Temporal dimensions of agency: A person's past (iterational), present (practical-evaluative), and future (projective) conditions leading to action.

Truancy: Student absenteeism without a good reason from the perspective of teachers or educational authorities (Reid, 2005).

# Chapter 2 - Literature review

## Variables and conditions that influence student absenteeism and student attendance: What is known?

Research in student absenteeism revolves around identifying contextual factors that motivate student attendance or absenteeism and curating interventions to meet those specific needs (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearney, 2003; Kearney, 2008a, Kim & Streeter, 2016). Kearney (2008a) created a holistic model for student absenteeism to include all contemporary contextual factors that has led to student absenteeism. Kearney's (2008a) model uses an educational approach towards absenteeism as opposed to psychological or social/criminal justice approaches which ignores certain risk factors (e.g., school and parent variables). Kearney's (2008a) educational approach includes the following factors that influence student absenteeism: child, parent, family, peer, school, and community. If these contextual factors are not resolved, student absenteeism may continue and potentially worsen (Kearney, 2008a). Fully resolving the contextual factors may improve school attendance (Kearney, 2008a).

To demonstrate the gaps in absenteeism research related to contextual factors, it is necessary to explore the contextual factors within each of the categories (child, family, parent, peers, school, and community factors) in Kearney's (2008a) model. Each subsection discusses the contextual factors that increase or decrease student absenteeism or school attendance. Due to the overlap of the data and evidence presented in the various studies, school, community, and peer factors have been consolidated into one section. A summary of child factors is presented in Table 2.1. Next, a summary of family/parent factors is presented in Table 2.2. Finally, a summary of peer, school, and community factors is presented in Table 2.3. These tables include

the author, contextual factors, research methods used, and school locale. The research methods and school locale for the studies are noted because they are used to identify gaps in student absenteeism research and help situate this study within absenteeism research. The school locales from the literature review help identify the lack of research in suburban, Kansas schools. The research methods help locate the lack of research in pursuing an ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism. Moreover, I argue for the need to research both gaps in the literature. Finally, I present the ecological agency theoretical framework.

## Child factors

The child factors category discusses conditions that are situated within the child or student. These conditions may motivate a child to engage in absentee behaviors. One of the most studied sub-fields of student absenteeism is situated in the child factors category. This sub-field is called "school refusal." Before discussing child factors found in the school refusal sub-field, it is important to provide an overview of the problematic and inconsistent conceptualization of school refusal.

The definition of school refusal "generally refers to anxiety-based absenteeism, often from separation, generalized, or social anxiety" (Kearney, 2008b, pp. 452-453). However, Kearney (2001, as cited in Kearney et al., 2004) defined "school refusal behavior" as students who choose to not attend school.

Due to the similarities of these two definitions, conceptualizations of school refusal and school refusal behavior have been problematic in school attendance studies. School refusal behavior is sometimes shortened to school refusal and is used interchangeably with school refusal (Heyne et al., 2019). Muddling the terms further, the conceptualization of school refusal

behavior may or may not refer to other commonly used terms such as truancy or problematic absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2019).

Birioukov (2016, as cited in Heyne et al., 2019) identified that the obscured conceptualization of school refusal terms stemmed from the different backgrounds and objectives of researchers. Kearney and Graczyk (2014, p. 3) stated "Psychologists, for example, commonly study anxiety-based absenteeism idiographically and clinically whereas educational and criminal justice experts commonly study delinquent-based absenteeism nomothetically and systemically. As a result, standardized terminology is lacking." Therefore, contemporary definitions are needed for the use of this study due to these inconsistencies. Heyne et al. (2019) conceptualized that *school refusal* is situated with the student's *emotional state*, and the child's refusal to attend school. *School refusal behavior* will be defined as the child's refusal to attend school and may include more risk factors than just the student's emotional state.

Contemporary research in school refusal includes the investigation into the contextual factors leading to absentee behaviors (Inglés et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008a). Kearney & Albano (2007, as cited in Inglés et al., 2015), shared the three primary research methods typically used to investigate school refusal. These methods include an interview (a semi-structured interview to help understand the origin of the behavior, i.e., diagnostic interview), SRAS-R (a Likert scale survey that focuses on evaluates the student's emotions in a school setting, escaping social situations in school, attention-seeking, and outside reinforcers), and the application of self-reports that appraise variables related to school refusal (Kearney & Albano, 2007, as cited in in Inglés et al., 2015). Kearney and Albano (2004) provided an example of using this methodology to explore the characteristics of school refusal students and concluded specific disorders, such as separation anxiety disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder, led to school

refusal. Kearney and Albano (2004) also observed that the most severe diagnoses of mental health disorders engaged in school refusal to avoid negative stimuli (Kearney & Albano, 2004).

Moreover, Ingul et al. (2019) identified other characteristics associated with school refusal students (e.g., anxiety and depression, somatic complaints, difficulties with transitioning from primary to secondary school or moving to a new school, class, or teacher, problematic emotional regulation, negative thinking, low self-efficacy, limited problem-solving). Thambirajah et al. (2007) also identified that school refusal students may change their behavior to get out of class (e.g., aggression towards others, guilting parents/guardians to get them out of class) but are well-behaved in any other situation.

School refusal students' anxiety can even manifest in self-harm or suicide ideation. Epstein et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of school refusal studies to see if there was a correlation between self-harm tendencies and/or suicidal ideation and student absenteeism. Epstein et al. (2019) concluded that correlations exist between suicidal ideation and student absenteeism and between self-harm tendencies and student absenteeism.

School refusal behavior also captures contextual factors influencing absenteeism. For example, Gonzálvez et al. (2018), using only the SRAS-R and self-report survey for their research (typical of school refusal studies), investigated school refusal behavior in eleven high schools in Quito, Ecuador. Specifically, Gonzálvez et al. (2018) investigated school refusal by observing three different school refusal profiles (non-school refusal, one tangible reinforcement [i.e., one or more of the following: avoidance of negative affectivity, escape from social and/or evaluative situations, pursuit of attention, and pursuit of tangible reinforcement], and multiple reinforcements [i.e., two or more of the following: avoidance of negative affectivity, escape from social and/or evaluative situations, pursuit of attention, and pursuit of tangible reinforcement]).

Gonzálvez et al. (2018) assessed the data through a distribution curve and concluded that students who had multiple reinforcements to school refusal behavior were linked to higher scores of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress).

Gonzálvez et al. (2019) investigated school refusal behavior and non-school refusal behavior in Spanish adolescent students using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the groups. They found students with school refusal behavior may be at a higher risk of developing social anxiety (Gonzálvez et al., 2019).

Beyond mental health issues causing students to engage in absenteeism, physical health also is a factor with school attendance (Kearney, 2008b). In Kearney's (2008b) contemporary review of student absenteeism, there were several medical issues that were linked to school absenteeism (see Kearney, 2008b for a comprehensive list of these medical issues leading to student absenteeism). In addition to medical issues, Kearney's (2008b) review of literature also highlighted the influence of somatic complaints (e.g., headache, nausea, vomiting) leading to anxiety-based (e.g., separation, generalized, or social) absenteeism. Somatic complaints were also related to school refusal behavior (Kearney, 2001).

ADHD is one notable condition that is linked to student absenteeism (Kent et al., 2011). Kent et al. (2011) investigated the academic experience of male high school students with ADHD in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Using comparison tests, the results suggested a correlation between ADHD and student absenteeism.

Additional contextual factors are also situated in the child factors category beyond students' mental and physical health. Gubbels et al. (2019), through their meta-analysis of 75 different studies into school absenteeism and drop-out risk factors, found large effect sizes for substance abuse (e.g., smoking, drug abuse, alcohol abuse) and antisocial or risky behavior (e.g.,

anti-social cognitions, high sexual involvement, showing risky behavior, ineffective coping mechanisms) within the child factors category. Gubbels et al. (2019) further reinforced the strong relationship between mental and physical problems and student absenteeism. Finally, Gubbels et al. (2019) also identified low levels of academic achievement, a history of grade retention, and a low IQ or learning difficulties as additional significant risk factors for absenteeism.

Using bivariate associations of survey data in metropolitan area middle and high schools, including urban and suburban schools, Hill and Mrug (2015) illustrated the relationship between student absenteeism and drug use. More specifically, Hill and Mrug (2015) concluded that student absenteeism was related to alcohol, marijuana, and combined substance use, specifically at lower grades.

Finally, academic self-perception, attitudes toward teacher and school, goal valuation and motivation/self-regulation also influence absentee behaviors. Balkis et al. (2016) investigated these attributes at two urban Turkey high schools with 423 students. In their study, students completed a survey which included personal factors and family factors (family factors are discussed in the "Parent and Family Factors" subsection of this literature review). The survey results were examined through ANOVA to observe if there were any relationships between student absenteeism and personal factors (academic self-perception, attitudes toward teacher and school, goal valuation and motivation/self-regulation) (Balkis et al., 2016). Balkis et al. (2016) found that lower academic self-perception, attitudes toward teachers and schools, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation were predictors of previous or current student absenteeism. Gubbel et al. (2019) reinforced these findings with their data, also stating that negative school attitude (and its associated attributes) influenced absenteeism.

Table 2.1 presents a summary of contextual factors within the child category that influence attendance.

**Table 2.1 Summary of child contextual factors**

| Author(s) | Contextual factor(s) | Research methods | Environment/ School Locale (rural, urban, or suburban) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kearney (2001, as cited in Kearney et al., 2004) | Internalizing [self] factors: general and social anxiety, fear, fatigue, depression and suicidality, and somatic complaints.<br>External [self] factors include noncompliance to parents, teacher commands, defiance and aggression, running away from school or home, clinging, and temper tantrums. | n/a | n/a |
| Inglés et al. (2015) | Internalizing and externalizing factors, emotional and behavioral problems, and mental health are of research interest for influencing school refusal. | Literature review - though the article suggested using an interview to help understand the origin, SRAS-R, and self-reports to "make a proper diagnosis" (p. 44). | n/a |
| Gonzálvez et al. (2018) | Students who had multiple reinforcements (two or more of the following: avoidance of negative affectivity, escape from social and/or evaluative situations, pursuit of attention, and pursuit of tangible reinforcement) to school refusal behavior were linked to higher scores of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress). | SRAS-R and self-report survey | High schools in Quito, Ecuador; no reference to school environment (i.e., rural, urban, or suburban students) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Epstein et al. (2019) | Suicidal ideation and self-harm tendencies. | Meta-analysis | n/a |
| Kearney (2008b) | Medical issues and somatic complaints. | Literature review | n/a |
| Gubbels et al. (2019) | Substance abuse, antisocial, or risky behaviors, students' mental and physical health, negative school beliefs, low academic achievement, history of grade retention, and a low IQ. | Meta-analysis of studies | n/a |
| Hill and Mrug (2015) | Student absenteeism is related to alcohol, marijuana, and combined substance use, specifically at lower grades; whereas cigarette smoking was more prevalent in higher socioeconomic status schools with white students. | Bivariate association of data - quantitative methods | Urban and suburban high schools |
| Balkis et al. (2016) | Academic self- perception, attitudes towards teacher and school, goal valuation and motivation/ self-regulation also influence absentee behaviors | Survey data through ANOVA - quantitative research methods | Urban high schools in Turkey |
| Ingul et al. (2019) | Anxiety and depression, somatic complaints, difficulties with transitioning from primary to secondary school or moving to a new school, class, or teacher, problematic emotional regulation, negative thinking, low self-efficacy, and limited problem-solving are associated with school refusal students. | Developed for framework | n/a |
| Thambirajah et al. (2007) | School refusal students may change their behavior to get out of class (e.g., aggression towards others, guilting parents/guardians to get them out of class) but are well-behaved in any other situation. | n/a (Book for practitioners) | n/a |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gonzálvez et al. (2019) | School refusal behavior students may be at a higher risk of developing social anxiety problems and having family conflict. | Self-reporting surveys (SRAS-R) - analyzed through ANOVA | Spanish adolescent students |
| Kent et al. (2011) | Student absenteeism and ADHD are linked. | Comparison tests (quantitative) | High school students in the Pittsburgh, PA area |
| Kearney & Albano (2004) | Separation anxiety disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder led to school refusal, and the most severe diagnoses (based on clinical severity ratings) engage in school refusal to avoid stimuli that provoked negative emotions or affectivity. | Mixed methods | Primary schools – though patients were referred to university-based clinics in Nevada and Kentucky that specialize absenteeism assessment and treatment |

Thus, students' mental and physical health, self-beliefs and self-perception, and drug use influence absentee behaviors. Specifically, mental health, and its associated disorders (e.g., anxiety), are clear motivators for engaging in absenteeism. Overall, these studies show the variety of different influential factors encouraging absenteeism in the child factors category.

### Parent and family factors

In addition to child factors affecting absenteeism, parent and/or family factors also motivate student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008a). Fornander and Kearney (2019) investigated parent and family factors and characteristics presented inside of the family unit. By surveying elementary and secondary students and analyzing the survey data using quantitative methods (i.e., ensemble and classification and regression tree analysis), they determined that higher levels of absenteeism were related to lower family participation in reactional/social activities, lower familial support of each other, and lower expression of feelings within the family unit (Fornander

& Kearney, 2019). Of note, Fornander & Kearney (2019) did not identify the school environment where the study was conducted.

Balkis et al. (2016) conducted a student absenteeism study in Turkey at two urban high schools with 423 students (Balkis et al., 2016). Students completed a survey, and the survey data was examined through ANOVA to see if there were any correlations between student absenteeism and parents' income/education (Balkis et al., 2016). Balkis et al. (2016) concluded that higher levels of income and educational attainment by parents related to higher rates of student attendance.

Gubbels et al. (2019) shared several significant risk factors that contributed to student absenteeism in the parent and family category after completing a meta-analysis. The risk factors included parents showing low levels of school involvement, low parental attachment, parental mental or physical problems, low levels of parental support or acceptance, low levels of parental control, history of child abuse victimization in the family, non-nuclear family structure, a low level of parental education, ineffective family system, and low family socioeconomic status (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Henry (2007) surveyed 8$^{th}$ and 10$^{th}$ grade students to find risk factors presented in truant students. When analyzing the survey data through a regression model, Henry (2007) uncovered that higher parental education, parental monitoring, participation in religious activities, and living with both parents were predictors of student attendance (Henry, 2007).

A study conducted by Hagborg et al. (2017) connected child abuse to student absenteeism. Using ANOVA and chi square tests on student self-reporting surveys, Hagborg et al. (2017) concluded that child maltreatment including witnessing domestic violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect, emotional abuse, and physical neglect, led to student

absenteeism. Of note, Hagborg et al. (2017) study was longitudinal and did not report the school environment beyond Swedish adolescents from ages 12-18.

Table 2.2 presents a summary of contextual factors within the parent/family category that influence attendance.

Table 2.2 Summary of parent/ family contextual factors

| **Author(s)** | **Contextual factor(s)** | **Research methods** | **Environment/ School Locale (rural, urban, or suburban)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fornander and Kearney (2019) | Lower active-recreational orientation (participation in recreational/social activities) | Ensemble and classification and regression tree analysis - quantitative research methods | Not applicable |
| | Lower expressiveness (encouraging expression of feelings) | | |
| Balkis et al. (2016) | Lower levels of parents' educational attainment | Survey data through ANOVA - quantitative research methods | Turkey urban high schools |
| | Lower levels of income from parent | | |
| Gubbels et al. (2019) | Low levels of school involvement | Meta-analysis of studies - quantitative research methods | Not applicable |
| | Low parental attachment | | |
| | Parental mental or physical problems | | |
| | Low levels of parental support or acceptance | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | History of child abuse victimization in the family | | |
| | Non-nuclear family structure | | |
| | A low level of parental education | | |
| | Ineffective family system | | |
| | Low family socioeconomic status | | |
| Henry (2007) | Parental education | Regression models of data - quantitative methods | 8th and 10th graders in the U.S.; no evidence of environment (rural, suburban, or urban schools). |
| | Parental monitoring | | |
| | Participation in religious activities | | |
| | Living situation (i.e., lives with no parents, lives with father or stepfather only, lives with mother or stepmother only, lives with a mother/stepmother and a father/stepfather) | | |
| Hagborg et al. (2017) | Child maltreatment | ANOVAs and chi square tests on student self-reporting surveys - quantitative methods | Swedish schools, school environment not reported. |

A pattern of overlapping data and evidence start to form. Multiple articles discuss the link between lower levels of educational attainment in parents, living situation, income, parental involvement, parental mental or physical problems, and child abuse and student absenteeism.

This further supports that the student's family, home environment, and family resources contribute to student attendance.

### School, community, and peer factors

School, community, and peer factors are the final set of contextual factors that affect student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008a). Focusing on the school factors first, Hartnett (2007) emphasized the importance of the school environment and peer influences by stating, "Teenagers are especially prone to environmental influences because they are still being formed as persons, and the cruel reality is that many [students] struggle daily for acceptance from their peers" (p. 35). Additionally, Hartnett (2007) observed that some peer groups are supported by the school's culture, but other peer groups are not supported by the school's culture. To expand, Hartnett (2007) examined attendance policy at Ingraham High School (Washington) and Spokane School District (Washington) and found that students were excused for reasons legitimized by the system (e.g., sports endorsed by school culture, illness, injury, death in family) and not excused for reasons that were not legitimized by the system (e.g., extra-curricular activities not supported by the school such as chess competitions or swim team tournaments, students who are absence due to parents' inability to get their child to school, parents not pre-planning for absence). Separating out absences, from excused to unexcused, provided benefits and privilege towards specific groups of students (Hartnett, 2007).

Henry and Huizinga (2007) also examined peer and school risk factors with truant youth in urban neighborhoods in Denver, Colorado. Henry and Huizinga (2007) compared the covariates of interest and truancy using multivariate regression models and found that the two biggest predictors for truancy were school performance and involvement with delinquent peers. Henry and Huizinga (2007, p. 516) also noted, "Though not significant in the full model, several

of the variables that describe students' perceptions of their school environment were individually salient predictors of truancy, including perception of an unsafe environment, perception of gangs in the school, perception that students and teachers had poor relationships, and perception that teachers did not utilize positive teaching practices." These negative experiences shifted students towards absenteeism.

Gubbel et al. (2019) identified additional significant contextual factors within the school setting. These significant risk factors included poor teacher-pupil relationship, low quality education, and a negative school or class climate (Gubbel et al., 2019). Van Eck et al. (2017) surveyed students in a large urban public school on their perceptions of the school's climate. The survey had questions related to the five domains of school climate (safety, learning, relationships, teaching, and the external environment), and used a multilevel latent profile approach to identify three individual-level school climate profiles (Van Eck et al., 2017). The pattern which emerged suggested that the more negative the school climate (e.g., school perceived unsafe, lower perception of student learning, weaker teacher-student relationships, poorer teaching), the higher the rate of chronic absenteeism (Van Eck et al., 2017).

Bullying is a peer factor that influences absenteeism. While the rate of physical bullying is on the downtrend, technology and social media has made bullying accessible outside of school (Waasdorp, et al, 2017). Havik et al. (2015) investigated relationships between peers and teachers in 45 schools in Norway by providing self-report questionnaires. It should be noted that the school locales ranged from large to small school populations (Havik et al. 2015). Havik et al. (2015), from their statistical analyses, discovered the following:

> "Poor relationships with peers [such as bullying from peers] at school could be an important risk factor for school refusal and could be a moderate risk factor for truancy.

> Moreover, according to these results, teachers' classroom management could play a role in school refusal indirectly by preventing bullying and social exclusion by peers. Finally, a direct association of teachers' classroom management with school refusal-related and truancy-related reasons was found among secondary school students, suggesting that perceived poor support from teachers could increase the risk of school refusal and truancy among these students. The present study underscores the importance of efforts to prevent bullying as a measure to reduce school refusal" (p. 221).

This not only highlighted the need for relationships in schools but also the need to reduce bullying to improve student attendance (Havik et al., 2015).

Certain instructional methods may be linked to student absenteeism. At the collegiate level, student absenteeism and lecturing are linked. Desalegan et al. (2014) used quantitative methods to detect the correlation between student absenteeism and lecturing at the college level.

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) compared daily student attendance and partnership practices between the family, school, and community at elementary schools in five rural schools and seven urban schools. Surveys were sent to the schools that included questions about daily student attendance and partnership practices between the family, school, and community, and using a variety of quantitative and descriptive statistics, they found that family, school, and community involvement activities improved student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Public transportation is a community factor that influences attendance. Stein and Grigg (2019) identified that changes in public transit are correlated with changes in school attendance. Specifically, more complex routes and longer time travel led to more school absences. Within the scope of the study, issues of transportation were magnified in the Baltimore schools because the metropolitan transit systems were designed for adult workers (Stein and Grigg, 2019).

Finally, another community factor influencing school attendance is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid changes and reforms occurred to ensure the safety of all students. This led to shifts from traditional education to remote learning where teachers had to learn how to teach in a remote learning setting (Daniel, 2020). However, these shifts to remote or alternative instructional modes led to absentee behaviors (Coker, 2020). These absences have been attributed to the teachers being unable to fulfil the role of assisting the absentee students (Coker, 2020).

Table 2.3 presents a summary of contextual factors within the school, community, and peer category that influence attendance.

**Table 2.3 Summary of school, community, and peer contextual factors**

| **Author(s)** | **Contextual factor(s)** | **Research methods** | **Environment/ School Locale (rural, urban, or suburban)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hartnett (2007) | School policies favor certain peer groups over others. | Reviewing and comparing school policies (qualitative) | Urban (Washington) |
| Henry and Huizinga (2007) | School performance (low school performance correlates to lower rates of attendance) and involvement with delinquent peers leads to lower attendance. | Multivariate regression models - quantitative methods | Urban (Colorado) |
| Gubbel et al. (2019) | Poor teacher-pupil relationship, low quality of the school or education, and a negative school or class climate | Meta-analysis of studies - quantitative research methods | Not applicable |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Van Eck et al. (2017) | More negative school climate (perception of safety, learning, relationships, teaching, and the external environment) leads to higher rates of absenteeism. | Multilevel latent profile with assessing survey data - quantitative methods | Urban |
| Epstein & Sheldon (2002) | Family, school, and community involvement activities improve student attendance. | Quantitative and descriptive statistics used | Rural and Urban |
| Stein and Grigg (2019) | Issues of transportation lead to higher rates of absenteeism. | Several quantitative models used | Urban |
| Havik et al. (2015) | Poor relationships with peers, including bullying and poor support from teachers, lead to higher rates of absenteeism. | Self-report questionnaires and correlation with data from self-reported surveys | School locale reported to range from large to small school populations |
| Coker (2020) | Shifts (due to COVID-19) to remote or alternative instructional modes led to absentee behaviors. | Mixed methods | United States (sampling of teachers' thoughts through a blog) |
| Desalegan et al. (2014) | Student absenteeism and lecturing are linked. | Quantitative methods (e.g., survey which were analyzed through bivariate and multivariate analyses) | Hawassa University College of Medicine and Health Science students |

The school, peer, and community category contains several unique elements which encourage (or discourage) student attendance. Relationships with the student appear to be the most common contextual factor influencing school attendance. Both bullying and poor

relationships lead to absenteeism. Conversely, better relationships assist with school attendance. Regardless, there are several factors leading to absenteeism in the school, peer, and community category.

## Gaps in student absenteeism research

There are two vital, yet problematic, patterns that emerge within student absenteeism research. First, the current research in absenteeism either fails to clarify the school environment or primarily focuses on urban, and to a lesser extent rural, schools. Alternatively, this dissertation offers the investigation into absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school. As this dissertation reveals, there are issues with absenteeism in both school contexts. Juxtaposing the two school contexts magnify the issue of absenteeism. Current literature has not investigated the suburban, Kansas context. Thus, absenteeism in the suburban, Kansas school context should be studied.

Second, the literature predominantly uses quantitative methods to collect and assess data. This infers that there are fewer overall studies using qualitative research methods (and thus more narrow perspectives). However, more studies are starting to take a qualitative approach to unravel the complex issues with absenteeism. One approach, an ecological agency approach, has not been used to understand student absenteeism. The ecological agency approach offers the opportunity to understand students' decision-making within a specific context and provides an avenue to modify the school context to better promote school attendance.

I consider both gaps in research to be problematic and argue for the need to investigate the two gaps within absenteeism research. The argument to research in Kansas schools and suburban schools is presented first.

## An argument for researching absenteeism in the suburban, Kansas school context

School characteristics and culture are influential to student absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, as cited in Hartnett, 2007; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008a). In addition, McCracken & Barcinas (1991) and Logan & Burdick-Will (2017) identified that different school characteristics and experiences (e.g., differing volume of teachers, course offerings, extra-curricular, cost per-pupil, privilege with certain student groups, student experience at school) are found in different school locales (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban schools). Therefore, different school contexts may influence student absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, as cited in Hartnett, 2007; Hartnett, 2007; Kearney, 2008a; Logan & Burdick, 2017; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). However, negative interactions between teachers and/or peers may lead to absenteeism (Gubbel et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2015). Thus, these different school contexts may influence rates of attendance.

However, student absenteeism research, based on the findings in the literature review, either neglects to differentiate between school locales or primarily focuses on urban, and to a lesser extent, rural schools. Moreover, there is no contemporary literature investigating absenteeism in the suburban, Kansas school context. In the subsections below, I argue that research in suburban, Kansas schools is necessary by presenting the absenteeism problems in each school context and overlapping the issues to emphasis the absenteeism issues found within the suburban, Kansas school context.

### Kansas schools

Within the state of Kansas, student absenteeism is pervasive. Chang et al. (2018) reported that 12.2% of Kansas students are chronically absent and that 13% of public school districts in the state of Kansas have a high (20-29% of all students in the district engage in absenteeism) or

extreme chronic (30% or more of all students in the district engage in absenteeism) absentee rate. Compared to the bordering states of Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Missouri, Kansas had the highest percent of absentee students and second highest number of districts with high or extreme chronic absenteeism at the time of the study (Chang et al., 2018).

In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* was passed which impacted schools in the state of Kansas (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). One of the goals of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is to make schools accountable for student outcomes (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). This is completed through providing schools with metrics and outcomes that reflect student achievement (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). One of these indicators is student attendance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; *Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). This reflects the need for schools in Kansas, along with the rest of the United States, to improve student attendance (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). The *Every Student Succeeds Act* provides funding to states to improve rates of attendance (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015).

In the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, the federal government allocates funds to states who distributes these funds to schools to counter absenteeism (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). These funds are used to supplement the school's efforts to reduce absenteeism (e.g., supplying resources to disadvantaged students, engaging with parents and families, improving school conditions for student learning) (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015; Jordan, 2018).

However, Kansas schools are handicapped on resources that they can distribute to their students. Kansas Association of School Boards (2017) stated, "Kansas spent less than the average of all states, aspiration states, and most peer groups; and, since 2008 the rate of increase has been much less than any comparison group, which means Kansas per pupil funding has been

falling behind" (p. 9). Thus, Kansas schools have fewer resources when compared to their peers. The lack of resources restricts the implementation of programs that focus on improving attendance. For example, while effective intervention programs for absenteeism provide a cost benefit to the school, there is an initial investment that is needed to start the program (Pritchard & Williams, 2001). Furthermore, Guryan et al. (2017) researched a four-year mentoring program to improve attendance called Check & Connect (C&C). Relevant to this argument is the cost-effectiveness of the program. Guryan et al. (2017, pp. 4-5) shared,

> While C&C was effective in that it improved key outcomes for a target population of students, it is useful to compare C&C to other interventions that have an impact on student engagement outcomes, as interventions vary in cost, complexity of implementation, and the mechanisms through which they affect change in student behavior and outcomes. As implemented in this project, the C&C program cost about $1,700 per student per year. This translates to a cost of approximately $500 per incremental day of attendance brought about by the intervention for the 5th-7th grade students.

Thus, school attendance programs require financial investments to start up and maintain. However, with limited funds in school districts, policymakers may not have the financial resources to start up or maintain these school attendance programs. Therefore, Kansas schools are ill-equipped to provide resources relative to their peer states who have more funds to implement interventions for absenteeism.

Since Kansas public schools receive lower funding and have sustained issues of absenteeism, it is imperative to research absenteeism in these school contexts to maximize their

resources. Furthermore, there is no contemporary research outlining common contextual factors leading to absenteeism in any Kansas school locales (i.e., rural, suburban, or urban). Therefore, it is necessary for research to explore absenteeism in Kansas schools. This study is one such exploration. Moreover, there is also a need for research within suburban schools.

## Suburban schools

While research in suburban schools has revolved around racial and ethnic achievement disparities (Ferguson, 2002), another persistent issue present in suburban schools, even in schools with strong reputations, is the large number of chronically absent students (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates, 2016). Recent evidence has suggested that suburban schools have had an influx of diversity (Gill et al., 2016). This has led to cultural mismatches and negative perceptions toward minority students in suburban schools (Gill et al., 2016). Deficit ideology is one perception that is harmful to minority students. Deficit ideology suggests that students are doing poorly because they do not care about school (Gorski, 2016). This ideology is harmful in the teacher-student relationship (Gorski, 2016). Relationships are integral to maintaining attendance, and poor relationships with peers and teachers may lead to student absenteeism (Teuscher & Makarova, 2018).

Furthermore, Students of Color receive more punishment for misconduct compared to their white peers (Amemiya et al., 2020; Welch & Payne, 2010). Amemiya et al. (2020) also recognized that punishment for misconduct (such as absenteeism) perpetuates absentee behaviors. Thus, minority students who engage in absenteeism continue to engage in absenteeism due to the harsh punishments that they receive. With the influx of diversity in

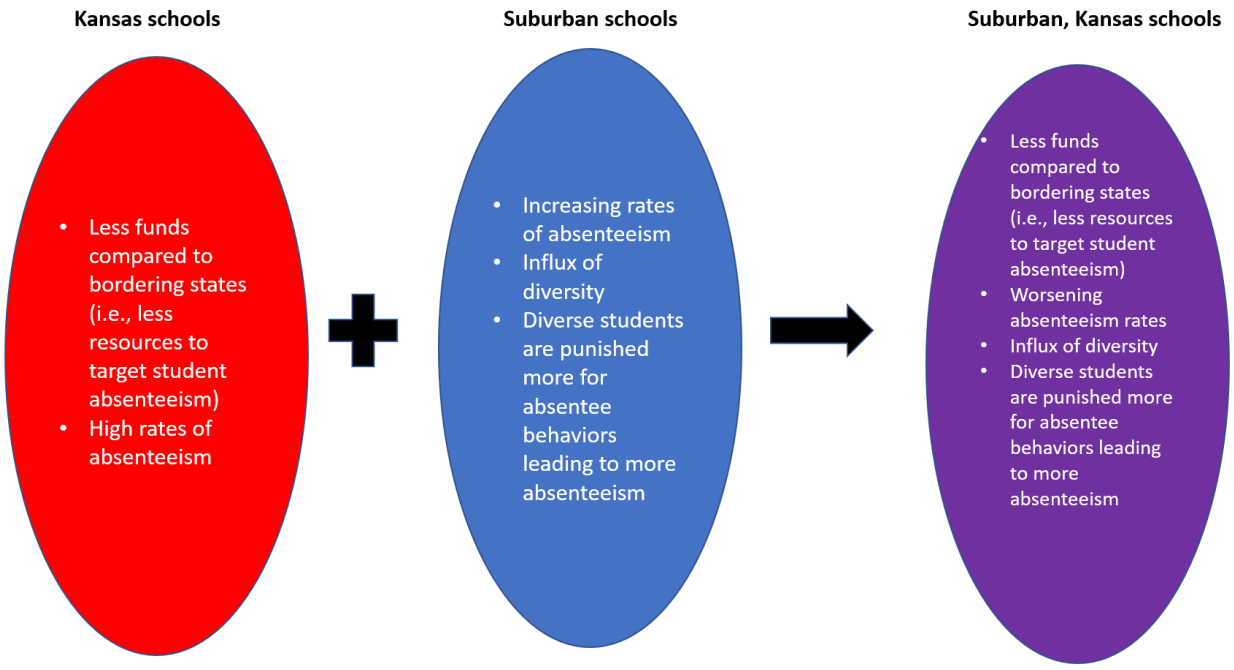
suburban schools (Gill et al., 2016), minority students may be punished more frequently which may potentially lead to absentee behaviors (Amemiya et al., 2020; Welch & Payne, 2010).

However, on the opposite side of the argument, suburban schools have many affordances which promote student attendance. When compared to urban schools, suburban schools have lower rates of poverty which lead to higher levels of educational attainment (Rury & Saatcoiglu, 2011). Additionally, suburban schools are more likely to have a parent who has completed a four-year college degree, more resources for curriculum, more teacher control over curriculum, fewer challenges hiring teachers, and lower teacher absenteeism when compared to urban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

Student absenteeism generally happens more in urban rather than suburban school environments (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996), thus research has primarily focused on urban school contexts as opposed to their suburban counterparts. However, with the growing group of diverse populations causing inequities, in addition to the increasing rates of absenteeism, an investigation into suburban schools could provide insight into the specific contextual factors that lead to absenteeism.

There is minimal research investigating student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school context. Kansas schools have high rates of absenteeism and less resources to combat absenteeism compared to their peers. Suburban schools have declining rates of attendance and have increasing rates of diversity. Diverse students are targeted and reprimanded disproportionally for absenteeism leading to more absenteeism. When juxtaposing these issues together, the problem worsens. Figure 2.1 illustrates this point.

**Figure 2.1 Issues of absenteeism in suburban, Kansas schools**




Suburban, Kansas schools are an important site of research due to the volume of student absenteeism issues found within its context. To explore student absenteeism in this context, this dissertation uses a qualitative approach called ecological agency. This approach has not been utilized in other studies. The argument for an ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism is presented next.

## Expanding perspectives: An argument for an ecological agency approach to student absenteeism

The other pattern that emerged during the literature review was the consistent use of quantitative methods to identify and resolve absentee students' contextual factors. Quantitative research, which typically generalizes data, fails to understand the dynamic and unpredictable nature of humans and the elements of daily life (Holman Jones et al., 2013). Moreover, quantitative research, spawning from scientism and colonial research, limits the number of

perspectives within a topic (Douglas & Carless, 2013). As previously observed during the literature review, there were several contextual factors which led to absenteeism. Qualitative research may be better suited to understand these ranging dynamics (Holman Jones et al., 2013) and has been valuable in investigating permanent student absenteeism or student drop-out rates.

For example, Bridgeland et al. (2006) used surveys and interviews to capture the perspective of drop-outs. Student respondents revealed several surprising results which led to the students dropping out (e.g., school boredom, uninspired teaching, becoming a parent, helping family, too much freedom in high school, and late parent engagement) (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The study informed how the school environment can reduce students dropping out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

With student absenteeism being a significant predictor of school drop-out (Gubbels et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008a), it may be equally useful to also investigate student absenteeism through the absentee student's perspective and through the perspectives of other people involved with student absenteeism. Interestingly, there is a small but growing volume of research into the perspectives of the people involved with student absenteeism. The teacher, community, administrator, parent, peer, absentee student, and non-absentee student perspectives have built upon the understanding of student absenteeism (Blevins, 2009; Brookins, 2016; Cook & Ezenne, 2010; Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Kirkwood & Rintoul, 2005; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Sculles, 2013; Suhid et al., 2012; Triado-Ivern et al., 2020). Another useful perspective to student absenteeism may be understanding the individual agency of absentee students which may build upon the aforementioned perspectives and the current understanding of conditions leading to absenteeism. One contemporary approach to viewing a person's agency is ecological agency.

However, the ecological agency approach to student absenteeism has not been studied in any contemporary student absenteeism research. Ecological agency is a theoretical framework, and this framework provides a valuable approach to observing the student's perspective and conditions which lead to their decision-making. The next subsection describes the ecological agency theoretical framework and argues for its potential as a new perspective in absenteeism research.

## Theoretical framework: Ecological agency

Biesta's & Tedder's (2006) ecological agency is an alternative, but potentially valuable, approach to understanding student absenteeism. Agency is defined simply as an action by a person (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). The concept of agency has roots as an action theory where a person has the capacity to act through selective control based on potentially problematic situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). A more modern interpretation of agency is an action by a person that is manifested by the interplay of conditions found in a person's past, present, and future (commonly referred to in research as the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions respectively or the temporal conditions of agency) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The mixture of temporal conditions leading to action is referred to as the "agentic orientation" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The agentic orientation may be observed in reflection with some temporal conditions being more prominent or influential than others in any one specific instance (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Biesta and Tedder (2006) re-interpreted and added to Emirbayer's and Mische's (1998) conceptualization of agency. Compared to Emirbayer's and Mische's (1998) conceptualization, Biesta and Tedder (2006) suggested that a person *achieves* agency in their environment as

opposed to something people have. In other words, the person gains control over their actions through their environment; the action itself is also referred to as the *achievement-of-agency through [insert action here]*. Biesta and Tedder (2006) referred to this interpretation of agency as *the ecological understanding of agency* or *ecological agency*. The person's environment provides affordances and constraints on the person's perceived control over their actions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Environmental affordances and constraints include policies, rules, practices, and shared beliefs that are found in an environment; these affordances and constraints motivate or discourage human action (Biesta et al., 2015). A person encounters and considers their personal history, aspirations, and environmental conditions, and agency or action is achieved based on the person's assessment and/or reflection of their situation (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015).

Intentionality is also a concept important to ecological agency. Intentionality is the action plan to bring about an alternative future (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Ecological agency examines a person's intentionality by capturing the person's reflection of their personal history, aspirations, and environmental conditions. The examination of a person's intentionality captures the tension between each condition and helps one understand which conditions influence the decision-making process associated with the action of interest.

Ecological agency, in particular the examination of intentionality in relation to decision-making, is useful in demystifying the "hidden" environmental influences (e.g., collective beliefs, practices, policies, rules, social and material capitals, power dynamics) upon a person's action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015). For example, in educational research, ecological agency has been used in this capacity by primarily investigating the agency of teachers, and the environmental conditions influencing their agency and actions, during

educational reforms or changes (e.g., Balgopal, 2020; Biesta et al., 2015; Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Imants et al., 2013; Robinson, 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017). The use of ecological agency framework helped uncover specific collective beliefs and policies that funneled teachers into specific actions. Additionally, the use of ecological agency illustrated how new curriculum and policy presented by the school environment shifted the action of the teachers and provided a new understanding of the influences of the environment upon teacher decision-making.

Furthermore, Kipp and Clark (2021) argued that the absentee student's agency may be an invaluable component to understanding the student's daily decision to attend school. Specifically, the interplay of personal history, future aspirations, and environmental conditions implicitly dictates the absentee student's daily decision to attend or miss school (Kipp & Clark, 2021). In other words, using the ecological agency perspective, an absentee student will achieve agency through either the action of absenteeism or school attendance. Understanding the phenomenon of agency achieved through school attendance or absenteeism can clarify (or complexify) the school and personal components that motivate a student to decide whether to skip or attend school (Kipp & Clark, 2021). Specifically, capturing the absentee students' intentionality can provide a unique illustration of the personal history, aspirations, and environmental conditions leading to their daily attendance decision. By illustrating these conditions, the theoretical framework clarifies the institutional beliefs, capitals, practices, power dynamics, and policies, along with personal conditions, that shift students' intentionality toward or against school attendance and absenteeism. This new knowledge can help direct environmental changes, in the form of modifying shared beliefs, practices, policy, and rules, to better promote student attendance and restrict student absenteeism.

Finally, there is a clear gap in student absenteeism literature in relation to the ecological agency perspective. The absentee student's perspective has been accounted for in a small quantity of studies (e.g., Kirkwood & Rintoul, 2005; Brookins, 2016; Sculles, 2013; Blevins, 2009). However, none of these studies have taken an ecological agency approach to student absenteeism. The ecological agency approach to student absenteeism offers a different method to understand absenteeism because it focuses on the interplay of environmental and personal conditions. To reiterate, agency is the interplay between personal history, future aspirations, and environmental affordances and constraints that motivate a person to act in a specific manner (Biesta et al., 2015). It is the focus upon the actor-environment complexities related to the achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism that thoroughly separates this study from other similar qualitative studies focused on student perspectives, experiences, and decision-making. This new perspective offers an innovative illustration of the complex interplay between the student and the school.

In summary, whenever an action occurs, agency is achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Contextual factors and environmental conditions shift a person's intentionality toward or against a specific action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). My study endeavors to capture the interplay of personal and environmental conditions, specifically in the suburban, Kansas school environment, and to illustrate the tension and complexities found in the absentee students' daily decision to attend or miss school.

## Summary of literature review

Collectively, child, parent, family, school, community, and peer factors influence students' daily decision to attend or miss school. However, based on the survey of literature,

there are gaps within student absenteeism research. First, there is a lack of research within the suburban, Kansas school context. Kansas schools have higher rates of absenteeism compared to their peers but also have fewer resources to combat absenteeism. Suburban schools have a growing attendance problem and have issues with schools potentially harming minority students which may lead to absentee behaviors within the targeted populations. This dissertation offers a study at a school (Gardner Edgerton High School in Gardner, Kansas) that intersects with both problematic school locales.

Second, the agency of absentee students has also not been observed in previous literature. Using the theoretical framework of ecological agency, this dissertation aims at understanding why absentee students achieve agency either through school attendance or absenteeism. Ecological agency has been valuable in contributing to educational research with teacher decision-making, and it may provide an equally valuable contribution to understanding absenteeism. Specifically, the ecological agency approach builds upon the intricacies with the absentee students' daily decision to attend or miss school and uncovers the "hidden" environmental affordances and constraints upon their decision-making and intentionality.

Thus, this dissertation offers the investigation into absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school using the ecological agency approach to understand why students attend or miss school. Chapter 3 illustrates the study's purpose, research questions, setting, participants, data collection methods, data analysis, strategies for trustworthiness, positionality, ethical considerations, and limitations.

# Chapter 3 - Methodology

## Introduction to Methodology

There are gaps in absenteeism research within the context of this study (suburban, Kansas schools). Additionally, the participants' decision-making through an ecological agency perspective has also not been captured. The study may be beneficial to researchers and policymakers in similar school contexts because the ecological agency approach provides a unique perspective of understanding the contextual factors associated with absentee students' decision-making. Specifically, understanding the absentee students' intentionality in relation to school attendance within the context may help improve educational practices and encourage attendance. Thus, the research aim is to capture the participants' decision-making and intentionality toward the action of school attendance or absenteeism within the suburban, Kansas school context. To reiterate, the manifestation of an action, within the ecological agency theoretical framework, is commonly referred to as "the achievement-of-agency" or "achieving agency." Thus, students achieving agency refers to the intentional action of school attendance or absenteeism. The research questions are conceptualized through the study's aims:

1. Why do absentee students achieve agency through absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school?
2. Why do absentee students achieve agency through school attendance in a suburban, Kansas school?

In general, these questions probe into students' unique conditions that contribute to their attendance behaviors (i.e., absenteeism, school attendance). The interrogative word "why" is best suited for the study because the "why" questions illustrate the purpose of the participants' daily decision to attend or miss school. "How" questions, however, provide details into the degree of a

behavior, which in our study, would mean to the degree that students engage in the behavior of absenteeism (i.e., the frequency, what their absenteeism looks like). Therefore, the interrogative word "why" is used in the research questions.

The research methods engage with the decision-making of the participants' attendance choices using a case study methodology which are commonly used to answer "why" questions (Yin, 2002). The methodology section discusses my epistemological commitments associated with the study, research design, setting, participants, data collection methods, data analysis, and trustworthiness of data. Table 3.1 summarizes methodological approach to the case study. Additionally, the methodology section also discusses my positionality in relation to the study, ethical considerations, and potential limitations.

**Table 3.1 Framework for case study methodology (modeled from Yazan's (2015) Juxtaposition of three case study approaches)**

| **Dimension of Interest** | **Approach** |
|---|---|
| Epistemological commitment | Constructivism |
| Defining case and case study | A case is a delimitation of a single entity which may include a person, group, or policy (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015).<br><br>The study uses a descriptive case study design (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).<br><br>The case: Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry students' achievement-of-agency through absenteeism or school attendance. |
| Designing a case study | The research design is systematic. The case study design includes a literature review, theoretical framework, research problem, research |

| | |
|---|---|
| | questions, and purposeful sampling of participants (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). |
| Setting | Gardner Edgerton High School (Gardner, Kansas, United States). |
| Participants | Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry students who engaged in absenteeism during the 2020-2021 school year. |
| Gathering data | The study exclusively uses qualitative data sources (e.g., interviews, artifacts, observations) (Brown, 2008, Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, Yazan, 2015).<br><br>The data collection uses interviews (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), relational maps (Copeland & Agosto, 2012), and drawings (Guillemin, 2004; Literat, 2013). |
| Data analysis | This study focuses its analysis on "making sense of the data" (p. 178) using thematic/narrative analysis (Merriam, 1998).<br><br>Thematic analysis includes iterations of coding (i.e., inductive, deductive, and In Vivo coding strategies), organization of codes (i.e., convergence and divergence of data), organization of codes into categories based on similarities, and finally consolidating categories into themes that answer the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; Xu & Storr, 2012) |
| Validating data | Validation, trustworthiness, and rigor of data are achieved through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are achieved through the following strategies: prolonged engagements, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, audit trail, reflexivity, and thick descriptions (Houghton et al., 2013). |

## Epistemological commitment

My study aligns within a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism suggests that knowledge is constructed by both the researcher and the phenomena or the Other (i.e., the person being researched) and is always situated in a sociopolitical context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Levers, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). In this sense, there are multiple realities, worlds, and truths compared to only one truth that is suggested by positivism and post-positivism. When juxtaposing ecological agency and constructivism, we can see constructivism expressed in the theoretical framework. When investigating a person's agency, the interview and other data collection methods work toward helping the person engage in reflection over their own agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). In a sense, the person is understanding, interpreting, and conceptualizing their own agency and communicating it back to the researcher. It is through this data collection process that the person's agency is constructed which informs the researcher of the participant's agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Thus, the researcher and participant collaborate to construct a perspective, viewpoint, or understanding of the participant's agency.

Complexifying agency even more is the introduction of new conditions or reflections which may alter the person's understanding of their own agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Agency is never fixed or stagnant (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Therefore, the dissertation's methodological format is situated within a constructivism paradigm. Case studies can be conceptualized through a constructivist paradigm (Yazan, 2015). Specifically, I use a case study methodology to construct an understanding of the participants' achievement-of-agency through absenteeism or school attendance. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor of case study methodology, the study uses an audit trail (Houghton et al., 2013; Xu & Storr, 2012). An audit

trail discusses and illustrates each step of the study and includes decisions and rationales for the analytical strategies implemented in the study (Houghton et al., 2013).

## Defining case and case study and designing a case study

A case is a delimitation of a single entity which may include a person, group, or policy (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). In this study, the cases are Gardner Edgerton High School absentee chemistry students' achievement-of-agency through either school attendance or absenteeism (i.e., the action of school attendance or absenteeism) during the 2020-2021 school year. In other words, the phenomenon is bounded within the absentee students' action of school attendance or absenteeism during the 2020-2021 school year at Gardner Edgerton High School (in Gardner, Kansas).

A case study endeavors to develop an in-depth understanding of the bounded phenomenon with the intention that the researcher learns from the bounded phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). A case study methodology is selected for the study because case studies synthesize context-dependent knowledge and understand the dynamics of a single case or setting (Darke et al., 1998; Flyvbjerg, 2006). These attributes also align with constituents of ecological agency. Specifically, the everchanging temporal dimensions of agency (i.e., past history, contemporary environment, and future aspirations) illustrate the complexities (both visible and hidden) found in human action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The attributes of case studies align within the ecological agency framework which make it a viable methodology for the study.

Case study designs are an integral feature of case studies. Case study designs endeavor to match the disciplinary perspective of the investigation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The specific case study design for this study is a descriptive case study design (Hancock &

Algozzine, 2017). A descriptive case study design "illustrate[s] or explain[s] key features of a phenomenon within its context" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 52). This aligns with the goal of the research which is to understand why the phenomenon of achievement-of-agency through absenteeism or school attendance occurs in Gardner Edgerton High School. Specifically, the design isolates the key features of the phenomenon which are the conditions leading to the targeted action. The study's data collection targets these features at an individual basis because the manifestation of agency is always unique (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The next section goes into detail on why Gardner Edgerton High School was selected as the study's setting.

## Setting

The setting for the study is Gardner Edgerton High School. Gardner Edgerton School District (USD 231) is in Gardner, Kansas, United States, and the high school of the district is Gardner Edgerton High School (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). Gardner Edgerton High School is classified as a suburban high school (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). The district has a predominately white student population (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). The district reports 5.3% of families are below the poverty level, 19% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and 38.2% of parents/guardians have completed a college education (Public School Review, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b.). Moreover, attendance rates at the high school are the lowest in the district; however, attendance rates are higher in Gardner Edgerton High School when compared to the state average (Chang et al., 2018; Kansas State Department of Education, n.d.). The attendance percentage rate at Gardner Edgerton High School has been consistently declining since the 2013-2014 school year (Kansas Department of Education, n.d.).

This district meets the criteria of an ideal site. Rossman and Rallis (2017) stated that "the ideal site is one where entry is possible. There is a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, structures of interest or all of these. You likely can build strong relations with the participants. Ethical and political considerations are not overwhelming, at least initially" (p. 243).

Gardner Edgerton High School meets all the listed criteria. First, entry is possible because I am a teacher at the high school at the time of the study. Additionally, permission for the study was granted by the Gardner Edgerton High School administration, the USD 231 district, and the institutional review boards (IRB). Therefore, entry for research is possible at Gardner Edgerton High School.

Second, Gardner Edgerton High School provides the opportunity to observe the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest. The site has the foundation for research interest through its ecology (i.e., suburban, Kansas school) and its specific student population (i.e., absentee students). Together, they provide an opportunity to observe the case.

Third, the ethical and political considerations are understood and are discussed in more detail in the "Ethical considerations" subsection later in this chapter.

Rossman and Rallis (2017) also suggested the research must be do-able within its desired setting. It is a do-able setting because I am employed at the school, have access to potential participants, can develop continuous rapport with students, staff, and administrators, and am able to engage in prolonged engagement with the participants which improves credibility of the study (Houghton et al., 2013). Through these characteristics, I provide myself the best opportunity at observing, learning, and understanding the case of interest at this site. The next subsection presents how the participants were selected for the study.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling is used to select the participants and capture the case of interest. Specifically, the homogeneity technique (i.e., a delimitation technique that bounds a specific subgroup) is used to select the students. The homogeneity technique is useful when exploring a particular subgroup (i.e., absentee students) (Palinkas et al., 2015). Using purposeful sampling (and the homogeneity technique), the participants were selected based on four aspects: people, actions, events, and/or processes to capture the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These delimitations, which are the bounds found within the case (Merriam, 1998), were conceptualized based on Creswell's and Poth's (2018) four aspects. The delimitations are:

1. Students must have missed 10% or more of school days during a school year (i.e., absentee student).
2. Students must be currently enrolled at Gardner Edgerton High School and taking my class.
3. Students must be willing to share their experiences and life histories (to observe their agentic orientation, intentionality, and agency).
4. Students must provide permission from themselves and their parents/guardians (to meet the ethical obligations of the research).

Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 226) suggested limiting the number of participants in a case study because "this number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases." This also ensures the research is do-able. The research questions endeavor to understand why absentee students achieve agency through either absenteeism or school attendance (i.e., the case). Thus, it is necessary to have students meet the criteria of absenteeism (i.e., 10% or more days absent from school during a school year). The absences are not

differentiated from excused or unexcused to ensure there is minimal bias between different social groups in the school (Hartnett, 2007). To meet the study's ecological setting, students must be enrolled as a Gardner Edgerton High School student. All together, these delimitations provide the bounds for the case of interest. To ensure prolonged engagement occurs, and by the request of USD 231, all participants must be enrolled in my class during the time of the study. I only teach chemistry and a study hall class called seminar; therefore, all participates must be enrolled in one of those two courses. Moreover, it is necessary for students to share their life histories and experiences to conceptualize their agency, agentic orientation, and intentionality. Finally, to meet ethical and legal responsibilities, an assent or consent form was signed before the data collection. These bounds provide an opportunity to understand why absentee students achieve agency through either school attendance or absenteeism.

## Data collection

Case studies use different data collection methods (e.g., interviews, observations, documents, artifacts) to understand the case of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Three data collection methods were used to investigate the case of interest and to triangulate the data (Brown, 2008; Clark et al., n.d.; Yin, 2002). This helps improve the trustworthiness of the data (Brown, 2008; Clark et al., n.d.; Houghton et al., 2013). The data collection includes interviews (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), relational maps (Copeland & Agosto, 2012), and drawings (Guillemin, 2004; Literat, 2013).

Each of these data collection methods synthesize an understanding of the conditions leading to the achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism. Data collection methods were synthesized to include iterations of interactions with the participants to understand the agentic orientation which lead to the action of interest (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). The

researcher then constructs an understanding of their achievement-of-agency based on the agentic orientation (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Each data collection method provides one such iteration to capture the agentic orientation leading to the action of interest (i.e., school attendance or absenteeism).

The first data collection method is a semi-structured interview. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, "interview questions are often the sub questions in the research study, phrased in a way that interviewees can understand" (p. 230). Biesta and Tedder (2006) suggested using interviews as a method to explore the agency of the participants. The semi-structured interview protocol meets this criterion. The questions in the interview protocol endeavor to observe their achievement-of-agency through absenteeism or school attendance, and thus answer the research questions. Specifically, these questions capture the participants' conceptualization and reflection of their past history, future aspirations, and surrounding environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). The participant and researcher, together, synthesize an understanding of the conditions that reveal the participants' achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Thus, an understanding of agency is mutually conceptualized and documented (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Appendix A contains the interview protocol that was used in the study. Audio data was analyzed through thematic analysis in Chapter 4.

The second data collection method is a relational map (or concept map). Relational maps "enabled participants to identify and reflect upon complex thoughts and behaviors much more deeply than they could have done if interviews alone had been used to gather data, and they enabled the creation of concise visual snapshots of the complex resulting data for means of data analysis and reporting" (Copeland & Agosto, 2012, p. 514). Additionally, relational maps also allow the participant to explain the connection between differing concepts (Clark et al., n.d.). To

understand a person's agency, it is important that the participants reflect deeply upon their experiences (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Relational maps invite students to share and deeply reflect upon their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Relational maps, when used with other qualitative methods, provide an opportunity for triangulation which improve the validity of the study (Copeland & Agosto, 2012). Therefore, the addition of relational maps is a vital component to collect data which help answer the research questions.

Participants were asked to write out events, phrases, experiences, or words that connect to why students miss or attend school. After participants completed the concept map, they were asked to explain why they made their selections. The discussion expands upon their selections providing the conditions that justify their attendance decision. Therefore, the relational maps focus on reflecting upon their experiences related to absenteeism and school attendance. Appendix B presents the concept maps used for the study. The relational maps were analyzed and used as artifacts to support the themes in Chapter 4.

Drawings are the final data collection method used in this study. Drawings are helpful with younger audiences because they do not necessitate linguistic proficiency and invite more nuanced perspectives and descriptions of events (Guillemin, 2004; Literat, 2013). Drawings offer an alternative glimpse into the human sense-making that would otherwise be challenging to describe using words (Kearney & Hyle, 2012). Drawings also allow the researcher to tap into the emotional lives of the participants (Kearney & Hyle, 2012). Moreover, drawings provide the participants an opportunity to frame and control their own experiences (Kearney & Hyle, 2012). Finally, drawings provide another avenue for discussion and investigation that may not have been observed otherwise (Literat, 2013). When juxtaposing drawings upon the ecological agency framework, the drawings and conversation from the drawings led to either an emergence of

hidden conditions leading to agency or reinforcement of previously discussed conditions. Finally, drawings improve the validity of the research through triangulation (Literat, 2013). Therefore, participants were asked to complete a hand drawing based on the prompts. The participants were asked to draw out their (or their peers') experiences with attending school, and their (or their peers') experiences with missing school. These drawings expressed emotions, elicited further discussion, and provided students with control over their expression of their experiences. See Appendix C for the drawing prompts used in this study. Images of the participants' completed drawings were used as artifacts to support the themes in Chapter 4.

To ensure validity of the data, two follow-up interviews were used in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first follow-up interview occurred after the transcription of the audio data. The participants read through the transcript to ensure trustworthiness of the transcription; an interview protocol was not used for this particular follow-up interview (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The second follow-up interview occurred after the analysis of the results to ensure that my themes were rigorous, trustworthy, and accurate. Appendix D provides a copy of the second follow-up interview protocol.

## Data Analysis

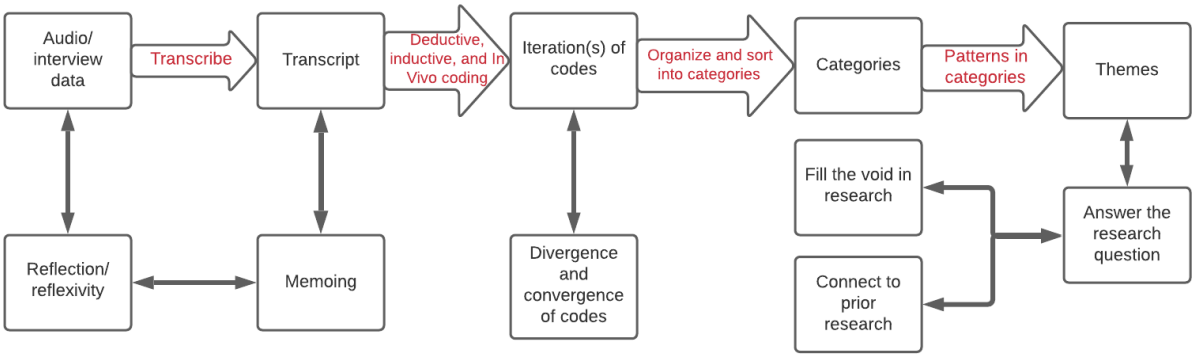
The goal of data analysis is to "[make] sense of the data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). The study analyzes the qualitative data using thematic (or narrative) analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) described this form of analysis as "preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion" (p. 251). The goal is to synthesize the conditions leading to the achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism, and

thematic analysis provides a framework to deconstruct the narrative data to meet this goal. It meets this goal by taking the narrative data and making sense of it in relation to the research's aims (Merriam, 1998). Through thematic analysis, I provide interpretations, expositions, and illustrations of the conditions leading to participants' achievement-of-agency through absenteeism or school attendance using thematic analysis.

The start of the data analysis process includes iterations of reading and memoing the transcripts from the interviews and observational notes and organizing the data into a short list of codes (small groups of information that match text segments from the data collection) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Saldaña, 2021). During the iterative cycles of coding, codes are expanded (i.e., divergence of data), reduced (i.e., convergence of data), and organized together into a smaller group of codes called categories (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; Xu & Storr, 2012).

These categories are organized into more overarching themes that connect the material to the case being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Saldaña, 2021). The themes answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the development of codes and interpretation of themes involve discussion among peers and participants, called peer debriefing and member checking respectively, to improve validity of results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Houghton et al., 2013). Finally, code mapping visualizes the codes that are collected; they are present in the study (Saldaña, 2021). Code mapping helps improve transparency, trustworthiness, and credibility to the findings (Saldaña, 2021). Figure 3.1 summarizes the study's data analysis process. The following subsection expands on the techniques that will be used during thematic analysis.

**Figure 3.1 Analyzing qualitative data**




## Iterations of coding and the formation of themes

First, the participants were given a chance to double check the transcript and verify the content. This is a strategy to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Next, the text was read several times and memoed. Memos help the researcher make connections among the data (Saldaña, 2021). Both deductive and inductive coding strategies were used to code the audio data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Deductive coding identifies pre-defined codes, based on previous research and the theoretical framework used in the study, before the coding of the data has started (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Furthermore, deductive coding can be adjusted if new or interesting codes emerge from the data that were not captured by previous literature or the theoretical framework (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Existing literature in student absenteeism suggested child, parent, family, peer, school, and community factors all influenced rates of student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). Additionally, the ecological agency theoretical framework suggests that the conceptualization of contextual factors in the student's past, present, and future motivate their daily decisions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Using both the theoretical framework and existing literature, the following codes were considered when coding the data: child factors, parent factors, family factors, peer factors, school factors,

community factors, past experiences, current experiences, and future goals. These codes are also connected to the case and research questions.

Inductive coding was also used during the iterations of coding. Inductive coding, where codes are developed during the coding process, provides data directly from the participants themselves which may expand the researcher's perspective of the topic (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Specifically, In Vivo coding (i.e., codes that directly quoted from the participants) was the method of inductive coding used during thematic analysis to best capture the participants' lived experiences and stories (Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo coding is particularly useful when working with teenagers to deepen the understanding of experiences for adults (Saldaña, 2021). Finally, to prevent code proliferation, I coded in as a "lumper" which takes larger groups of data and assigns a code to them (Saldaña, 2021).

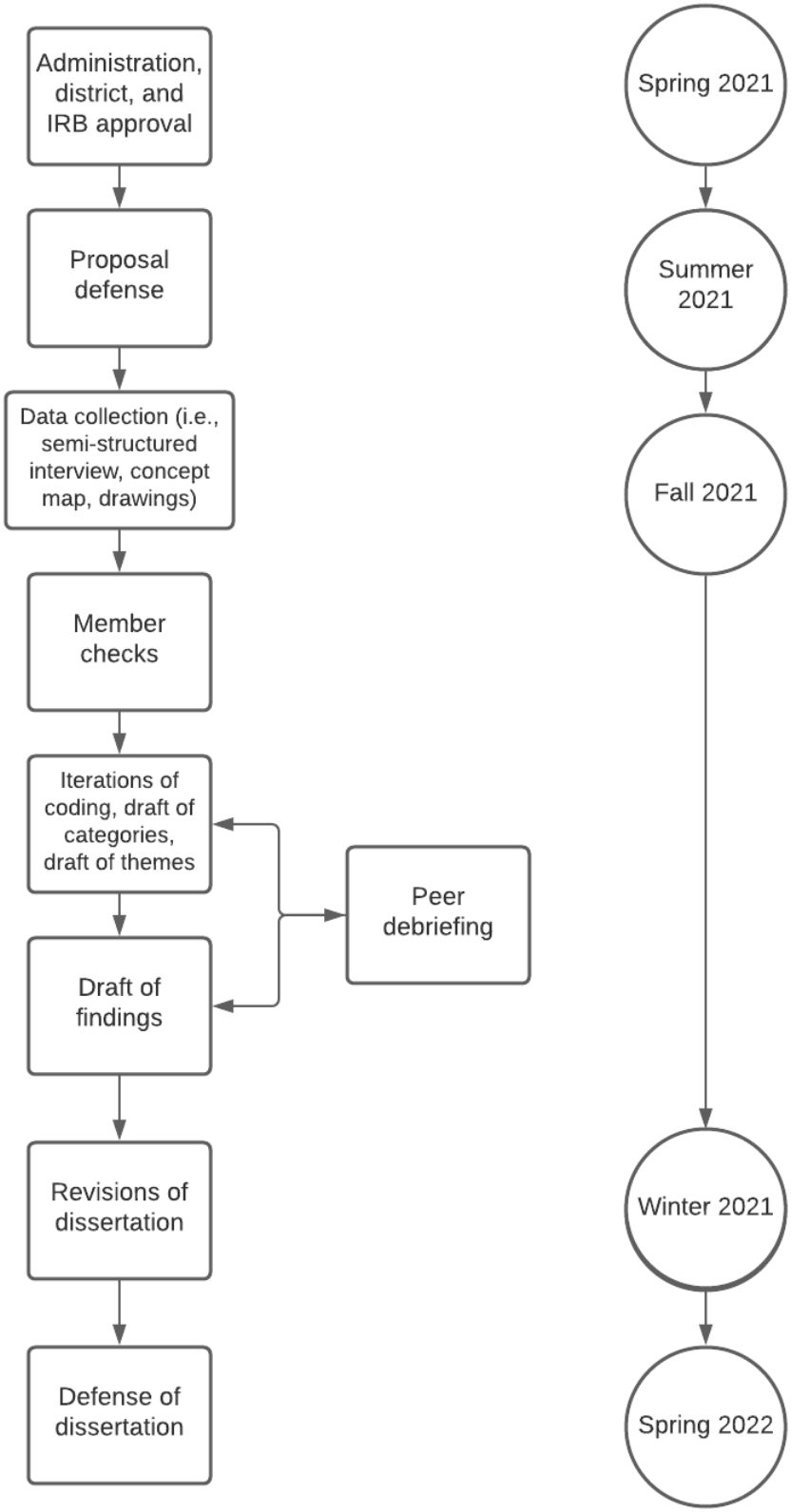
During the initial cycles of coding, I read and re-read the transcripts, made memos, and coded the data following the aforementioned strategies. Only data related to the research's aim was coded to ensure that code proliferation did not occur (Saldaña, 2021). Following the first iteration of codes, I underwent another iteration of coding that focused on using convergence and divergence (Xu & Storr, 2012). Convergence groups similar codes together, and divergence expands on codes to further illuminate important information (Xu & Storr, 2012). Once the codes were reduced to a smaller number of codes, the new codes were organized into categories. The conceptualization of categories is an innate process which sorts and organizes the codes based on "which ones seem to go together" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 241).

The themes were conceptualized from the categories. The themes are an expression of the individual understanding of the phenomenon of interest based on categories, memos, interviews, and self-reflection (Rallis & Ramon, 2017). The goal of the themes is to conceptualize from the

data a more general understanding of the phenomena (Saldaña, 2021). Themes are formed in a similar way from categories as themes are organized and conceptualized from the previously grouped data and are intended to answer the research question(s) (Rallis & Ramon, 2017). Additional artifacts, such as the relational maps and drawings, were used as additional evidence to support emerging themes.

The process of collecting data and data analysis may be lengthy (Saldaña, 2021). To illustrate the do-ability of the data collection and data analysis process, I created a timeline for the study. Figure 3.2 presents the timeline of the dissertation.

**Figure 3.2 Timeline of dissertation**



## Validating data

Quantitative research develops context-independent knowledge, whereas qualitative research develops context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Thus, quantitative research and qualitative research produce different outcomes. Rather than implementing validity, reliability, and other trustworthiness strategies from quantitative studies, it is necessary to use other tools to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the data due to the differences in methodological goals between the two research methods (Houghton et al., 2013). Houghton et al. (2013) suggested four approaches to rigor and trustworthiness. They are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking are strategies to ensure credibility of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Dependability and confirmability use audit trails and reflexivity (Houghton et al., 2013). Finally, transferability uses the strategy of thick descriptions when discussing the case (Houghton et al., 2013). The implementation of these four approaches improves the trustworthiness and rigor of the study (Houghton et al., 2013).

To validate the data, the following strategies were used: prolonged engagement, triangulation, thick descriptions, member checks, peer debriefing, disclosure of research bias and positionality, reflexivity, and an audit trail (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). Prolonged engagements with the participants were possible due to having the students in my chemistry or seminar classes during the timeframe of the study. I also had prolonged engagement within the site of study which included interactions between staff, administrators, and policymakers. Triangulation occurred due to the three data sources used in data collection and analysis. Member checks occurred after the transcription and after analysis. Elements of positionality, reflexivity, and subjectivity are expressed through my own personal reflections and stories that

are presented within this dissertation. These include a disclosure of my own experiences with absenteeism and discussion of my interests with conducting absenteeism research (See reflections in Chapter 1). Peer debriefing also occurred as I have discussed my dissertation thoroughly with my committee chair over the last two years. Thick descriptions occurred as I made observations of the students and the surrounding school context. Audit trails, which details the decisions used in the study, is the final strategy to improve trustworthiness and rigor in the study. My methodological decisions are interwoven throughout Chapter 3 further improving the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

These strategies were implemented in the study because they were do-able within the confines of the study and promoted the study's trustworthiness and rigor (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019; Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Yazan, 2015).

## Positionality statement

Additional bias may hamper the validity of the analysis of data, though the expression of this bias helps improve the credibility of the data (Houghton et al., 2013; Noble & Smith, 2015). Therefore, I present a positionality statement to further improve trustworthiness of data. Within this research context, I am a high school chemistry teacher at Gardner Edgerton High School. I am a white, able-bodied, cis male. This suggests there is an inequity of power (with myself having power over the students) when interviewing my students. This inequity of power is reflected in both my leadership position and expressed through my white, cis male, able-bodied privilege. Being a high school teacher at Gardner Edgerton High School also suggests that I am embedded in the school's culture. I try my best to develop positive rapport and relationships with all my students. Moreover, I believe that students can help us understand issues in education. Finally, I want my dissertation to help absentee students attend school by better understanding

their individual decision-making. I hope the better understanding of their decision-making can help shift beliefs, rules, policies, and practices in schools to better promote attendance.

Beyond my own privilege and beliefs, I also come into the study with my experiences with engaging in absenteeism while in high school (see Chapter 1). I received supports and conditions which helped me improve my school attendance. I experienced first-hand the complexities associated with absenteeism as a student. Through these experiences, I know that observing these complexities can help inform others and present a potential course of action to improve attendance.

## Ethical considerations

It is important to consider the ethical implications when researching the Other (i.e., individuals who are being studied) (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Hernandez and Ngunjiri, 2013). When conducting social research, the goal should be to minimize the potential harm towards the Other and their constituents (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). One step is by receiving approval from all parties and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). First, I asked my high school administration and district for their approval. I did this via email and attached all data collection activities to the email to illustrate my research intentions. The district requested that only students enrolled in my class may participate in the study. This is noted in the email and assent form. Both the high school administration and the district gave their consent for the study (see Appendix E and F respectively). I received the IRB approval shortly thereafter (see Appendix G). The final step was to read and gain signatures from both the participants and their parents/guardians for the informed assent form. The assent form discusses the data collection procedures, the extent of confidentiality, and other measures to prevent harm against the Other

(see Appendix G). I received the informed assent form from the four participants and their guardians.

To ensure the participants were protected, pseudonyms were given to each of the participants to safeguard their identities (Tullis, 2013). Moreover, some interview data was not used to ensure the participants' safety (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Neither prolonged engagement nor the data collection methods gathered video data of the participants to ensure their safety and confidentiality (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

## Limitations

It is important to outline the study's limitations to ensure trustworthiness and rigor (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). While case studies are useful in the capacity of generalizing a particular bounded case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), quantitative research studies provide a better avenue for extending their results of an unbounded case to a larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, the use of constructivism is subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is an important feature as my subjectivities are integrated into every part of my dissertation (Bhattacharya, 2009). Rather than hide them, I aim to be as transparent as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

My assumptions, perspective, and privilege, are always present in the data collection space (Bhattacharya, 2009). My position, and my desire to learn about the participants, may inherently disorient the participant's responses (Bhattacharya, 2009). Additionally, my assumptions and viewpoints are inevitability present in my writing which may raise concerns about the ability to capture the lived experiences and the trustworthiness of the research based on how the Other is represented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Xu & Storr, 2012).

Moreover, the ecological agency approach to observing student absenteeism may be problematic. Specifically, students may not be articulate or understand the conditions influencing their agency; they may also be unwilling to share their specific experiences or stories (Kipp & Clark, 2021). The data collection activities endeavor to assist with helping students reflect and articulate their individual agency.

There were also time constraints presented in the research methods. Time constraints limit the frequency of interviews, and more interviews may improve the understanding of one's agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Kipp & Clark, 2021). However, the implementation of a debriefing interview provides an opportunity of reflection which allows the student to further share additional stories or experiences.

## Summary of methodology

This study used a case study methodology to understand why absentee students achieved agency through absenteeism or school attendance in a suburban, Kansas school. The research is situated in a constructivist paradigm. The study expresses its constructivist assumptions and beliefs throughout the study. The investigation collected data from four Gardner Edgerton High School students who met the delimitations of the study. Data collection included a semi-structured interview, relational maps, and drawings. The data was transcribed, coded, and organized into themes. Artifacts (i.e., relation maps and drawings) are used to support the conceptualized themes. These themes answer the research questions. The themes are presented in Chapter 4. The positionality section presents my subjectivities to improve the trustworthiness of the data. The ethical considerations include strategies to ensure the safety of my participants (i.e., consent from all parties, pseudonyms, certain data not used to protect identifies, no video data).

Finally, the study's limitations are outlined (i.e., inability to generalize unbounded cases, subjectivities in writing, students' inability to share their agency, time constraints).

# Chapter 4 - Findings

## Introduction to findings

In this chapter, I present the findings from the data collection activities and qualitative analysis techniques to answer the research questions. To review, the study endeavors to answer the following two research questions:

1. Why do absentee students achieve agency through absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school?

2. Why do absentee students achieve agency through school attendance in a suburban, Kansas school?

Four Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry students, who engaged in absenteeism for 10% or more of school days during the 2020-2021 school year, were selected for the study. The participants were involved in three different elicitation activities including a semi-structured interview (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), relational maps (Copeland & Agosto, 2012), and drawings (Guillemin, 2004; Literat, 2013) to answer the research questions. Thematic analysis was used to understand the qualitative data and answer the research questions.

Each of the presented themes in this chapter provided an answer to one, and often both, research questions. The data utilized a case-by-case approach because achievement-of-agency is manifested through the interplay of individual and environmental efforts and conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). With the individual efforts being an integral condition to the achievement-of-agency, it is important to view each of the participant's conditions through an individual basis as opposed to a collective basis. To that effect, I engaged in thematic analysis individually with each of the four participant's data to understand why the participants engaged in school attendance or absenteeism during the 2020-2021 school year.

Chapter 4 offers an illustration of the school environment during the 2020-2021 school year. Next, a description of the participant and their emerging themes are presented. This is repeated for all four participants. The chapter concludes by summarizing the themes and finding from each participant.

## The 2020-2021 school year at Gardner Edgerton High School

I had the four participants in my chemistry course during the 2020-2021 school year. At the same time, we endured the COVID-19 pandemic. During the fall 2020 semester, students were in a remote learning environment. While in the remote learning setting, students had four of their eight classes one day and the other four of their eight classes the following day (i.e., block scheduling). Students attended class via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Throughout remote learning, teachers had the autonomy to select their instructional activities. Teachers also selected the amount of time that the students had to spend on Zoom. Classes were scheduled for 83-minutes in length with a seven-minute passing period between each class. I felt as a chemistry teacher that I should use the entire 83-minute allotted period so students would not have any homework at the end of the day. While my thought process was in agreement with the majority, other teachers decided to promote an asynchronous learning environment. I gave the students work throughout class and asked students to complete them in class compared to other teachers who gave tasks that simply needed to be completed by the next class period.

Each day, my chemistry students were tasked with joining my Zoom session and completing all learning activities. The learning activities ranged from message boards, practice problems, readings, breakout rooms, demonstrations, and surveys. Each activity was put into place to ensure that students were present throughout the 83-minute period and to promote or gauge student learning. For attendance, students replied to a one-question survey that asked how

they were feeling that day. Regardless of their answer, I counted the students as present if they answered the question.

Building student rapport during remote learning was difficult because the only interactions I received were either through chat messages, and even more rarely, when students unmuted and talked directly to me. Collectively, students rarely unmuted or had their web cameras activated.

We continued in a remote setting through February 2021, and then transitioned over to a hybrid model of learning. During hybrid learning, students came to school one day for four of their eight classes. The following day, students would have the same classes in a remote, asynchronous setting. The next two days were similar but with the remaining four classes. With my chemistry classes, I carried the same philosophy that I had during remote learning: students completed assignments in class. The classes were packed with learning activities during the entire 83-minute period. However, students did not have any homework or asynchronous material outside of class. At this time, I started developing rapport with my students including the four participants. I would chat with students before the bell and during the first couple of minutes of class. This helped me learn about their interests and learning needs.

The hybrid model only lasted three weeks before we transitioned over to full, in-person learning again which encompassed 83-minute class periods. Students would have half of their classes one day and the rest of their classes the next day. Compared to hybrid, I saw students twice as often for in-person learning. Once we were back in-person fully, I continued using the same philosophy that I had relied on during the 2020-2021 school year. Students completed work in-class and did not have work outside of class. I also continued to learn about my students but at a faster rate due to seeing the students at a more consistent basis. During my conversations with

the students, I shared my own stories and experiences including my doctoral studies. Often, I talked about my research interests with student absenteeism. Students shared their experiences of skipping and/or attending school. Our discussions led me to ask for volunteers for my study. Four students volunteered and completed the assent/consent forms for the study. I verified that each of the four participants qualified for the study. To recap, the conditions to be eligible for the study included:

1. Missing 10% or more days of school during the 2020-2021 school year.
2. Currently enrolled at Gardner Edgerton High School and scheduled in my chemistry class at the time of the study.
3. Must be willing to share their experiences.
4. Completed the consent/assent form.

The four participants for the study are Marble, Kara, Grace, and Tessa (all pseudonyms used to protect student identities). The next sections present a description for each participant, an audit trail leading to the formation of themes to ensure trustworthiness of the data through a code book (Houghton, 2013; Saldaña, 2021), and a narrative of each theme that explains why they achieved agency through school attendance or absenteeism during the 2020-2021 school year.

## Marble

Marble was a sophomore during the 2020-2021 school year. During remote learning, Marble engaged in part-time absenteeism which evolved into full-time absenteeism as the year went on. During her instances of part-time absenteeism, she would communicate to me that her internet was acting up and that she needed to collect her missing classwork. However, her missing classwork was rarely made up. In December, through Zoom chat, she articulated some

of her frustrations with paying attention and asked for help during a study hall period. However, she only showed up once. Her attendance plummeted near the end of the 2020 fall semester.

In another conversation during December 2020, Marble told me, again through Zoom chat, that she was a better student and learning online was hard. Once hybrid learning commenced, I got to know Marble more. Compared to remote learning, her in-person attendance was more consistent. While at times she seemed distracted, she worked hard and enjoyed talking with her classmates. This continued as we moved into full in-person learning, and our rapport grew. I eventually shared my study to Marble's class. Marble, Tessa, and Kara all had the same class. They all agreed to be included in the study and completed the assent form. Marble completed all data collection activities. Table 4.1 illustrates the conceptualization of the themes for Marble.

**Table 4.1 Conceptualization of themes - Marble**

| Themes | Categories | Code descriptions and sample quotes | Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher and peer interactions | Rapport with teachers | Marble's relationships with teachers.<br><br>"I turned in a paper that I wrote, and not only did I get an A on it, but my teacher said that it was one of the best they've ever received. And I was really, really proud of it. And just recently, it's made me a lot happier to come to school." | Positive feedback from teachers<br>Likes her teachers |
| | Desires to meet and be around friends | Marble's motivation to be around friends.<br><br>"And so, I remember when we were coming to school, I think probably the biggest motivator was seeing friends who you wouldn't have gotten to see most of the summer because of things going on with them." | See friends<br>Meet friends |
| | Absence of social | Marble's lack of social interaction during remote learning. | Zoom |

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| | interaction during remote learning | "I'm happy to be here in person because I get to talk to my friends; whereas, online I felt like I had no reason to come to school because it was just. . . Work after work, and I couldn't pay attention to what the teachers are saying, and it felt like being online or being in Zoom wasn't much different from just skipping." | Remote learning experience<br>Couldn't see friends |
| | Social pressure to perform well | Marble's internal desire to perform well in school.<br><br>"A pressure to succeed, which usually comes from parents or guardians, but it can also come from teachers or peers or something like that." | Embarrassed with poor work<br>Impress social circle<br>Grades put stress on her |
| Escaping the anxiety-ADHD loop | The school environment amplifies ADHD | Marble's experience with ADHD within the school environment.<br><br>"I couldn't pay attention to what the teachers are saying.' | Distractions<br>Hard paying attention<br>Never been able to sit down<br>ADHD<br>Lecturing<br>More comfortable having distractions outside of class. |
| | Interests and attentiveness | Marble's being more attentive during topics that interest her and being less attentive during topics that do not interest her.<br><br>"Never really put much effort into things at school that isn't something that interests me." | Effort<br>Boring<br>Passion for learning about a specific thing |
| | Finding a reprieve from anxiety | Marble's anxiety and stress and finding a way to reduce her anxiety/stressors.<br><br>"But for the classes where somebody will be lecturing those classes, give me a lot of anxiety to go to. And it's sort of more rewarding when I'm outside of school. I don't have to be dealing with the anxiety in the | Escaping anxiety<br>Stress<br>Anxiety |

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| | | classroom. I have no idea what this person is talking about, and I just don't know, and I'm completely lost now or something. It feels like more rewarding to be outside of that environment than it does to be in it." | |
| New autonomy and responsibilities | High school is more challenging than past school experiences | Marble's changing academic experience from elementary and middle school to high school.<br><br>"I used to have all A's, and I was considered to be one of the, if not the, smartest kid in my classroom. . . I want [school] to get easier." | High school different<br>"I want [school] to get easier."<br>"Not good at school."<br>School performance<br>Grades<br>Failing<br>Easier in the past<br>Missed assignments and information<br>Learned helplessness |
| | New family expectations | Marble's new responsibilities and freedoms within her family unit.<br><br>"I just know that in middle school, I wasn't expected to do very much work, and I could. I – sorry. . . When I wasn't expected to do as much work, I would have more time for myself and set aside time where my mom could make sure I was doing my work." | Shifting familial roles<br>Parents<br>Autonomy |

For Marble, teacher and peer relationships and the opportunity to socialize during in-person learning motivated school attendance. However, the lack of teacher and peer relationships during remote learning motivated student absenteeism. New autonomy and responsibilities, such as caring for her younger siblings during remote learning, shifted Marble's intentionality toward absenteeism, but when her responsibilities were revoked when returning to in-person learning, she engaged in school attendance. Finally, the desire to escape the anxiety-ADHD positive feedback loop motivated her to engage in absenteeism. Together, these themes were the recurring conditions, captured by the data collection, that influenced her daily decision to attend

or miss school. The following subsections further illustrate the contextual factors and how they shifted her intentionality toward or against school attendance or absenteeism.

### Teacher and peer relationships

School attendance was a challenge for Marble during remote learning. She either failed to join the Zoom sessions, or she told her teachers that her internet was not working. Zoom sessions were difficult for Marble especially from a social aspect. Sometimes, she did not have friends in her remote learning classes; and, if she did, it was different than the in-person learning environment. She did not communicate with her friends on Zoom. When hybrid learning/ in-person learning started, Marble's attendance improved. She attributed this shift in attendance to being able to see her friends. She commented:

> I think probably the biggest motivator was seeing friends who you wouldn't have gotten to see most of the summer because of things going on with them. But yeah, I think the biggest motivator when they were in school was coming to see friends, which is probably why online school was so hard because you wouldn't be able to see any of your friends that way.

When observing her in the classroom, it was easy to come to the same conclusion. She was frequently talking to her peers, when appropriate, during class. I decided to keep her in the same group of students due to her academic improvement that she displayed during the second semester. She remarked how school is the primary way to meet friends. It was the one place where you could always find friends. After school, her friends sometimes had other responsibilities which made them unavailable. Thus, for Marble, school was the primary place to find friends and to hang out with friends on a consistent basis.

Beyond the social enjoyment, she felt pressure to do well at school which required her to attend school. Parents, teachers, and friends pressured her to perform well at school. Negative

school performance resulted in feelings of embarrassment and disappointment. Marble was an all-A's student throughout her academic career up until high school. She felt the social pressure to maintain her previous role of academic success. When she failed, she was overwhelmed with guilt and disappointment. When she had success, she was showered with positive praise from her teachers and social circle.

When in a remote learning setting, she was not able to physically hang out with her friends. She also did not receive any positive praise from her teachers. This led to self-doubt and disengagement. The lack of social interactions influenced her decision to skip school because she was not rewarded with social capital. Additionally, she still felt pressure to perform well, and this pressure stimulated feelings of anxiety which were detrimental to her attendance.

## Escaping the anxiety-ADHD loop

**Figure 4.1 Marble's illustration of anxiety and ADHD in the classroom**

Marble was diagnosed with both anxiety and ADHD which made it difficult for her to focus while in class. Throughout her school career, Marble oscillated between taking and not taking medication for ADHD due to the medication's side effects. Both anxiety and ADHD were harmful to her school attendance. During the data collection, Marble drew a picture (in Figure

4.1) to illustrate the compounding challenges of having both ADHD and anxiety. When I asked about her drawing, she shared her experiences with both anxiety and ADHD, and how it was harmful to her school attendance.

> I wrote around here when I drew my thought bubble. It was more just a bunch of random things that I think about every day because. . . My mind. . . Every time the teacher will say something, either they say something that reminds me of something, or I just start thinking about something more interesting on accident. . . It's just really easy to get distracted by everything and that includes things outside. So sometimes I'll get distracted by my own thoughts and sometimes I get distracted because I see things. And then I start thinking about those things a bit too much. And then, my teacher talking with blanks in it because I always managed to either miss the most important information or come back at a time where I missed the information that led up to it. I generally feel more at peace when I'm allowed to do my own things, because even when I am listening to my music and I'm doing my own things, my mind does wander quite a bit. But it's hard to explain it. But it feels nice - like it feels more natural, and it feels just good to let my mind wander.

Both social constructs and her ADHD exacerbated her anxiety in the classroom. Marble's anxiety inhibited her from successfully completing classwork and encouraged her to not attend school. Her anxiety worsened during teacher-led instruction, particularly during lectures. She was unable to focus during lectures, and she would let her mind drift to other topics of interest. This led her to missing important concepts. As she went from middle school to high school, lecturing became more prominent. It was particularly prevalent during remote learning and math class in the prior school year. Marble missed math class by going to the counselor's office. Marble recollected her experience in math which led to absentee behaviors.

> I know when I put something off for a really long time, the more anxious I get about doing the thing that I'm putting off because I've been building it up in my head. And not only that, but [people with anxiety] miss classwork. But if they came back, they wouldn't even know what was going on in most classes, and that made them anxious. And then with each passing day, [they] would get more anxious, and you would be missing more. So, you know, that it would be harder to come back.
>
> . . .
>
> But it really seems like school – [students with anxiety] just feel like there's no point anymore because it's a lot of stuff that they don't understand, and they feel like they're not - it's just more fulfilling to be outside of school, I think.

In Marble's case, due to her ADHD, she had difficulty missing key pieces of information during teacher-led instruction. She was unable to focus or pick up on critical content. In turn, she would not know how to complete her work which gave her anxiety because she felt the pressure to succeed from her social circle. She did not understand the content which led to negative self-worth and self-talk. Then, her anxiety, and symptoms of anxiety, exacerbated her ADHD. This cycle of anxiety and ADHD perpetuated without interruption. During remote learning, she could not break this cycle due to the volume of lecturing that she had to endure.

When she moved to the in-person learning environment, learning became easier because lecturing was not the only instructional strategy being utilized. She encountered much more student-led instruction and was able to focus better as a result. In turn, her improved attention reduced her anxiety because she started having academic success again.

Additionally, when Marble found a subject interesting, she wanted to learn more about it. Homework could be completed swiftly during these instances. The different instructional strategies helped hook her onto a topic that she found thought-provoking.

When understanding Marble's achievement-of-agency through absenteeism, ADHD and anxiety inhibited her agency achieved through school attendance. The school environment prevented her thoughts from being free but also introduced harmful self-talk. To escape from these restrictions, she achieved agency through absenteeism.

### New autonomy and responsibilities

Marbles compared her new responsibilities during remote learning in the 2020-2021 school year to her middle school experience.

> I just know that in middle school, I wasn't expected to do very much work, and I could. I – sorry. . . When I wasn't expected to do as much work, I would have more time for myself and set aside time where my mom could make sure I was doing my work. But now that I've gotten older, my mom has less time to make sure that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing because I have two babies in the house now and I don't really feel motivated to get my work done anymore.

Starting in high school, Marble was given more responsibilities to care for her younger siblings and more autonomy to complete her work as she saw fit. For example, in middle school, she shared that there was minimal homework assigned. When homework was assigned, her parents were present to help her. Overall, middle school was easy for Marble. However, her experience in high school was much different compared to middle school. During high school, she was assigned more homework than ever before, took more challenging courses, and was required to assist in the upbringing of her two younger siblings in the house.

Marble took the onus of her shifting familial situation and helped with her younger siblings such as feeding or cleaning them. Furthermore, during this same timeframe, she started taking on a new level of responsibility to prepare herself for a postsecondary world. At the time of the interview, Marble desired to become a cartoon artist, a professional Dungeons and Dragons dungeon master, and a Twitch streamer. However, school inhibited her ability to improve her future goals. She did not think that many of her classes prepared her for her future endeavors. She utilized her improved autonomy during remote learning to improve her crafts. Since these skills were not nurtured during remote classes, she skipped them and practiced her skills. She practiced drawing, storytelling, and gaming. In her perspective, school was a harmful distraction in her pursuit of the arts. However, when she returned to in-person learning, she started realizing the need for school. The instructional practices shifted away from lecturing and more towards creative avenues which helped Marble see the necessity behind the curriculum.

The remote learning setting added a new level of autonomy for which Marble was not prepared. She would be overwhelmed with homework which triggered her anxiety. When her anxiety was overwhelming, neither classwork nor homework would get completed. Interestingly, the return to in-person learning brought a restriction to her autonomy which helped her improve her attendance. It was more challenging to miss school in the in-person environment because missing school involved more than just logging off Zoom. In turn, she was able to complete homework more in school than at home which led to an improvement of her grades. She also did not have the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings while in school. Thus, reducing the number of responsibilities enhanced her focus on schoolwork. Her improvement of grades reduced her anxiety and led to a better rate of attendance.

New responsibilities and autonomy contributed to Marble's decision to miss school. She prioritized her siblings and self-interests over school during remote learning. She also had an increased workload during remote learning. The increased workload from remote learning was not useful to her own improvement of skills. Without Marble's caretakers assessing her decision-making, she was not inhibited from making the decision to skip school. However, in an in-person setting, the parents withdrew her familial responsibilities. Additionally, the in-person environment also constrained her decision to miss school because it was more challenging to miss in-person learning. From there, Marble was able to focus on performing well on schoolwork. This led to improved self-worth, reduced anxiety, and improved attendance. Her improved attendance led to approval by her parents, teachers, and social circle which led to another iteration of attendance.

## Kara

Kara was a junior during the 2020-2021 school year. When we started remote learning in September 2020, she was one of the few students in the class who consistently used her web camera. She actively participated in class and answered questions via Zoom chat. Kara stuck out to me because she was quick to correct any minor mistakes (e.g., misspellings, miscalculations) that were inadvertently present in my teaching. She started off as a strong student in my class.

However, as the semester went on, like her peers, she started turning off her web camera, had missing daily work, and started to miss class at a relatively consistent rate. At times, she attempted to make up missing work, but this was not consistent. When the absences started, I received emails from her which informed me of her absence. However, as the absences mounted, her email communication declined. Near the end of remote learning, I rarely saw her present in our Zoom meetings.

When in-person learning returned in February 2021, I started to see her more frequently, but absences still occurred. Marble and Kara were in the same class, and I unintentionally placed her in the same laboratory group as Marble. When she was present in class, she completed the classwork before her peers and was eager to help other students who were struggling. This led me to believe that she had the innate ability to rapidly learn. As mentioned in Marble's section, I shared my doctoral work, and Kara was interested in sharing her absenteeism experiences with me. She completed the assent form and data collection activities. Table 4.2 displays the conceptualization of the themes for Kara.

**Table 4.2 Conceptualization of themes - Kara**

| Themes | Categories | Code descriptions and sample quotes | Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Physical health | Health problems | Kara's physical constraints or issues.<br><br>"I have a lot of medical issues, so I have a doctor's appointment, or I have a migraine." | Migraines<br>Hidradenitis suppurativa (HS)<br>Heartburn<br>Misaligned spine. |
| | Physical pain | Kara's physical pain she experiences.<br><br>"If I have a migraine, I can't, like, sit in front of a screen because I have a lot of trouble, like when I have my migraines." | Pain<br>Can't stare at a screen<br>Hurt<br>Needs downtime when unwell |
| The learning environment is enjoyable, positive, necessary, and easy | Learning experiences | Kara's learning experiences from elementary to high school.<br><br>"I just like I have an interest in many different things, and if I | Likes learning<br>Interests<br>Easy<br>Bored of lectures<br>Mindset |

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| | | find something interesting, I want to learn more about it." | |
| | Peer relationships | Kara's positive experiences with her school friends.<br><br>"Yeah, I had my friends. I like being around them. I only have two friends, but then I'm acquaintances with everybody else, I guess like or friendly. And we do school stuff, but I'm not going to hang [outside of school]." | Social<br>Fit in<br>Friends<br>Acquaintances |
| | Rapport with teachers | Kara's impression of her high school teachers.<br><br>"I guess like [teachers] encouraging what like what you want to do or whatever, like not putting people down." | Likes her teachers<br>Supportive teachers |
| | Specific future goals | Kara's post-secondary aspirations.<br><br>"I guess planning for the future because. You can't really. You can't really get far in life without, like a high school degree at least, and then college, if you want to go to college, then you need a high school diploma. And some people don't understand how like you feel like they don't understand how much they're. I guess giving up by skipping school." | Surgeon<br>Preparing for college<br>Found a future career that she likes |
| Family stressors | Achieving autonomy from step-father | Kara's desire for autonomy especially from her parents | Rebellious<br>Wants autonomy<br>Getting away from parents |

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| | | "[Stepfather] wants to know everything that's going on." | |
| | Protecting her brother | Kara's familial role to protect her brother | Help with family<br>Protecting family<br>Brother<br>Self-harm in family |

The themes "family stressors" and "the learning environment is enjoyable, positive, necessary, and easy" were contextual factors shifting her intentionality toward school attendance. However, her physical health, as a contextual factor, would shift her intentionality toward absenteeism. Together, these three themes were the recurring conditions, captured by the data collection, influencing her daily decision. The following subsections further illustrate the contextual factors and how they shifted her intentionality toward or against school attendance or absenteeism.

### Physical health

Kara missed school throughout the school year due to several different physical ailments (e.g., migraines, hidradenitis suppurativa (HS), heartburn, misaligned spine). The assortment of health issues contributed to her absenteeism through physical pain. Remote learning was particularly difficult for Kara because she was unable to stare at a screen for long periods of time without triggering a migraine. She told me about her challenges with migraines early in the school year and asked to keep her web camera off. I accommodated but still encouraged her to have her web camera on to improve engagement in the classroom. The issue with migraines persisted throughout remote learning.

These health issues have been present throughout her life. Illnesses during elementary school, such as pneumonia and strep throat, led to hospitalizations. She was constrained by her pain, and her only available avenue while in pain was absenteeism. However, despite the consistent physical health issues, Kara has several affordances that motivate her to achieve agency through school attendance despite her physical health constraints.

### The learning environment is enjoyable, positive, necessary, and easy

During the interview, Kara repeated several times that she found learning to be enjoyable. School exposed her to new and different material; and, if she liked it, she explored the topic independently. For example, she was interested in discovering more about Greek mythology and the dynamics of the gods at the time of the interview. Thus, she enjoyed that school presented many different, yet interesting topics, about which she could learn. Another such subject was the medical field.

During her high school career, Kara discovered a passion for medicine and desired to become a surgeon. She shared that she wanted to "go to Kansas City University [University of Missouri – Kansas City] to get my Human Anatomy and Biology bachelor's degree and then go to medical school. And then residency eventually." High school provided avenues and resources to obtain the necessary skills to help her achieve her post-secondary aspirations. For example, Kara was consistently meeting with her counselors throughout the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year to get into courses that had opportunities for college credit. For her, education limited her achievement-of-agency through absenteeism. She was not going to get the grades necessary for her post-secondary aspiration through missing school because absenteeism harmed her academic performance. Thus, agency was achieved through school attendance, so she would be able to get to her post-secondary goals.

Additionally, learning was always easy for Kara. She enjoyed completing homework because she always received high marks or grades from her assignments. Learning led to rewards such as positive feedback from her teachers and her peers. She praised the teachers for always being supportive of her learning abilities. Additionally, she complimented her teachers for presenting options to make up missed work. The positive feedback motivated her to continue to work hard in school.

Additionally, she attributed her desire to learn because it was more natural to her. When understanding her agency, the ability to rapidly learn afforded her unique opportunities and conditions that may have not been afforded otherwise.

### Family stressors

For Kara, family stressors were a prominent constraint for achieving agency *through absenteeism*. Kara shared that she was close to her mother but had a tense relationship with her stepfather. Kara described her stepfather as:

> He wants everything to be perfect, I guess. So, he [isn't lenient] when it comes to like chores or whatever, even if I'm sick. If I'm sick, I still have to do [chores] before I can get on my phone or electronics or whatever. Even if I'm sick like I have a migraine or whatever. And then, yeah. He's just kind of… He wants to know everything that's going on. He's kind of like just there all the time - like a helicopter parent.

Her mother was less restrictive with Kara's decision-making. While her mother was also involved in her daily life, such as being her Girl Scout leader, she provided Kara with space unless there was an emerging problem at school or home. However, during remote learning, both parents were at home, and Kara desired to be away from her stepfather because she felt restricted by him. She was unable to do the things that she wanted to do. These feelings of wanting

autonomy started in middle school. It was the first time that she desired to do her own thing. She also started resisting what she perceived as conformity to obtain autonomy. She expressed her autonomy by having a different friend group that was more into, based on her perspective, risk-taking behaviors (e.g., dating others, staying up later, not listening to adult figures). The feeling of autonomy did not subside for Kara when she went into high school; she continued to desire to have autonomy. With her home environment constraining her agency and autonomy, Kara felt repressed at home, so she achieved agency through school attendance more consistently when she returned to an in-person learning environment.

Kara was also very close to her brother. Being only eighteen months apart in age, they developed a strong rapport with each other. Kara enjoyed the school environment which her brother hated. Additionally, Kara's brother went through several notable mental health crises such as self-harm tendencies. His self-harming behaviors were severe enough that it led to hospitalizations. During these instances, Kara had to shoulder more of the familial responsibilities and felt pressured to prevent her brother's self-harming tendencies. She elaborated:

> And I guess I also have a hard time [missing school]. Like if my brother's here [at school], I usually want to be here because he goes here. But I just. . . I worry because of the whole cutting thing. Like last year when he was a freshman, there was an incident. And I had to leave class because he was in [the] counselor's office.

When understanding Kara's achievement-of-agency through school attendance, her brother was a contributing factor. Kara felt a familial responsibility to ensure the safety of her sibling. In school, Kara wanted to be there in case anything happened to him. Specifically, she wanted to prevent her brother's self-harm actions and hospitalizations. This constrained her

achievement-of-agency through absenteeism because she needed to be at school to prevent her brother's mental health emergencies.

## Tessa

Tessa was a junior during the 2020-2021 school year. Tessa, when she attended, actively engaged in my lessons during remote learning. She answered questions, completed the classwork in a timely manner, and self-advocated when she did not understand. She frequently communicated using private chat. She let me know if she was confused about certain content, was feeling anxious or stressed, or wanted to share information about her personal interests. She appeared to me as being a perfectionist where anything less was a failure.

At the beginning of the school year, Tessa would let me know if she was going to be absent. Typically, Tessa stated that she was going to therapy which was scheduled during my class. As the year went on during remote learning, she still frequently used private chat to communicate with me, so when she was absent, it was noticeable. Her absences started to mount as remote learning continued. After returning from absences, she typically communicated to me in a panic state at the beginning of class. She stated that she was overwhelmed, not understanding content, not being capable enough to be successful, or needed more time on finishing work. I interpreted these actions as being overwhelmed and stressed due to the volume of assignments. As a response, I minimized the volume of work that she had to complete during these particular instances. During remote learning, Tessa consistently asked for help and desired reassurance which made it easy to remember when she was absent.

When we switched over to the hybrid learning environment, I felt that I built more rapport with Tessa than other students due to her willingness to consistently communicate. She asked questions far more frequently than her peers. Most notably, when she would ask for help,

she would state that she felt she was dumb or incapable of learning the material. I encouraged her to reinforce the belief that she could perform the learning tasks effectively. Tessa usually understood the content after we worked through it together.

The switch to full in-person learning brought a new wave of absentee behaviors. Her attendance continued to be inconsistent. Additionally, Tessa would let me know that she needed to go see the counselor at seemingly random times. Frequently, she also openly announced that she was stressed and overwhelmed right as she entered my class moments before it started. Tessa was also in the same class as Kara and Marble, so we had conversations about my studies. Tessa seemed particularly keen to participate in the study because she reminded me about getting her an assent form and updating me when she would turn in the signed assent form. She followed-through and submitted the signed assent form and completed the data collection activities. Table 4.3 displays the conceptualization of the themes for Tessa.

**Table 4.3 Conceptualization of themes - Tessa**

| Themes | Categories | Code descriptions and sample quotes | Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| "I am different." | Racism | Tessa's experiences with racism in school.<br><br>"I used to be called the N-word every day." | "I used to be called the N-word every day."<br>"So not feeling black enough for the black community and not feeling white enough for the white community"<br>"I was different" |
| | Bullying | Tessa' experiences with bullying inside and outside the classroom.<br><br>"It's just hard to overcome what they're saying about you." | "[A friend] would just say really toxic things."<br>Bullying through social media<br>In-person bullying<br>"I started to stick up for myself." |

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| | | | "Everyone was watching me all the time."<br>"It's just hard to overcome what they're saying about you." |
| High school stressors and mental health | Mental health in the school | Tessa's school experiences and its negative influence on her mental health.<br><br>"[School's] just really stressful because it's overwhelming with so much to focus on and not enough space to focus on it." | Skipping feels like a mini break<br>Mental health<br>Mental health getting better<br>Piling on homework<br>Crying<br>Stress<br>Learned helplessness |
| | Hard to get help in high school | Tessa's inability to find help when needed during school.<br><br>"It's just really difficult when students like get to school and they're overwhelmed and they feel like they have no option and they go to see the counselor, that the counselor is busy. So, they're just struggling and just sometimes they skip school because, like, no one really likes crying in school, especially in your classes." | Can't get help from teachers<br>Can't go see the counselor when needed |
| | Ease of missing school | Tessa's ability to leave the school environment.<br><br>"It's barely noticed when someone goes home and skips school because no one's really watching them." | Easy to get out of school<br>"I used to [pretend] I was sick." |
| | Future goals and aspirations | Tessa's postsecondary aspirations. | Dream university |

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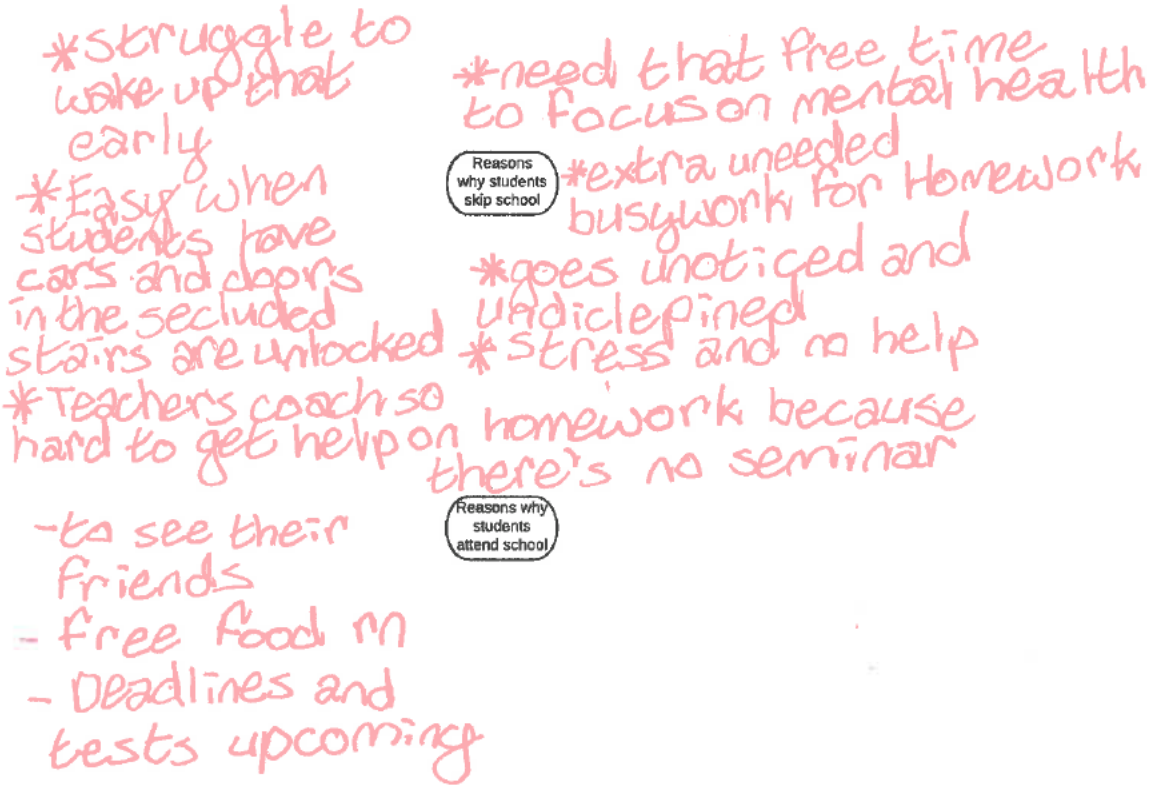
| | | "You learn skills that you actually need to know [at University]." | "You learn skills that you actually need to know [at University]."<br>Open up boutique after college<br>"Focus on the future to steady myself" |
| | Changes during COVID-19 | Tessa's experiences with COVID-19 changes (e.g., remote learning, new schedule).<br><br>"During remote, everything was new and weird." | Remote learning<br>Changes were difficult |
| | Understanding adult figures | Tessa's preference towards flexible, empathetic, and understanding teachers and parent.<br><br>"And then like classes I do like attending, the teachers are like understanding and like open minded." | Teachers focusing on mental health<br>Open minded teachers<br>Mother is my rock |
| | Strict and inflexible teachers | Tessa's negative experience with stricter teachers.<br><br>"He's really strict; hard to even be in that class." | Teachers are strict<br>Inflexible teachers<br>"Some teachers are rude." |
| | "Who's going to be there?" | Tessa's social experiences in school.<br><br>"Who can I hang out with during school?" | Friends<br>Bullies<br>Talk behind your back |

For Tessa, two themes (i.e., "I am different"; high school stressors and mental health) emerged that shifted her intentionality either toward or against school attendance or absenteeism.

"I am different" shares how bullying and exclusion fed into her feelings of anxiety which shifted her decision-making toward absenteeism. "High school stressors and mental health" magnifies the daily tension between her mental health and academic performance. The allure of strong academic performance leading to a better future motivated her school attendance. However, the lack of school support and mounting stress shifted her decision-making towards absenteeism. The following subsections further illustrate the contextual factors, their unique tensions, and how they shifted her intentionality towards or against school attendance or absenteeism.

**"I am different."**

**Figure 4.2 Tessa's motivation for attending or skipping school**



Tessa commented, “Umm, I just really noticed, like, how short the reasons why students attend school was compared to the reasons why students skipped school. So, I feel like that is difficult and ridiculous.”

Tessa, unlike the other participants, regularly participated in student absenteeism throughout her schooling. She also had a much more negative association towards school. Throughout her academic career, she always felt that she was different than her peers. Most notably, she was harassed for being a Student of Color. For example, while attending elementary and middle school in Missouri, Tessa stated that she “used to be called the N-word every day. And so, it got to the point that I really thought it was normal.” From these experiences, she understood herself as different than others at her school. During both her elementary and middle school years, she dealt with people talking behind her back, verbal abuse, and feeling unwelcomed by both peers and teachers. When these instances started occurring, she tried to “distance herself” from the hate that she was enduring at school. The bullying and racism also happened outside of school where her perceived friends mocked her and her family on Snapchat. The Snapchat videos circulated to other people which amplified her embarrassment.

Tessa started resisting her bullies in middle school. She started challenging her peers who were mistreating her. In high school, she moved from her school in Missouri to Gardner Edgerton High School. She commented that while the racism was not as prevalent in Gardner, Kansas, she was still bullied. Tessa stated:

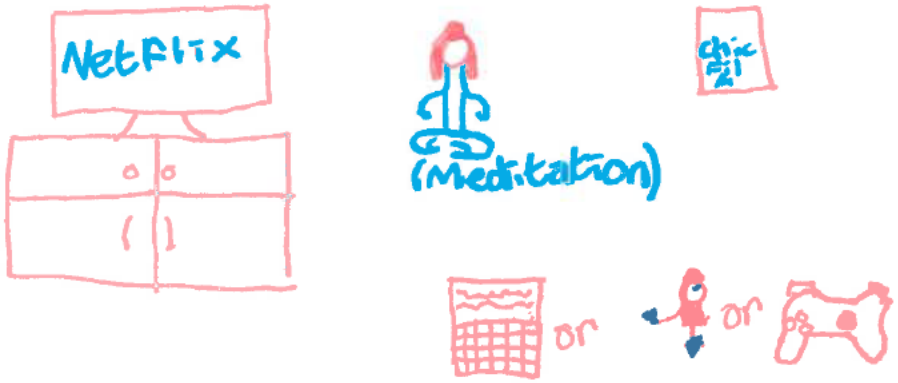
> I have other friends, and they've been making fun of me because I'm too whitewashed. So, that gets to like a point. And I'm mixed. So, [I’m] not feeling Black enough for the Black community and not feeling white enough for the white community. It separates me to where like I feel like I'm just alone. So, what's the point in trying?

Her peers also bullied Tessa when she shared her own problems with them. They criticized and diminished her problems which hurt Tessa. The persistent bullying and racism, even after moving schools, harmed her self-worth. Tessa remarked:

> I perceived that as like. . . It was hard because I felt different again from all the kids. And they always, like. . . They wouldn't, like, come out and say it, but they always thought I was different. And like, I didn't think I was as worthy as the other kids in the classes.

The feeling of being different constrained her achievement-of-agency through school attendance. When she attended school, she continuously was subjugated to bullying because her appearance did not match the normative status. The bullying, even between schools, has remained throughout her educational career. At home, she was able to do activities that did not bully her or make her feel different (see Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3 Tessa at home**




At home, she was able to be herself without the risk of criticism for being different. She escaped the hate. Thus, the most desirable outcome from bullying was achieving agency through absenteeism. The school environment, though, added more stressors than just feeling different; it also influenced her mental health.

## High school stressors and mental health

Tessa suffers from bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and anxiety. Unfortunately, the school environment presented many challenges for her mental health during the 2020-2021 school year. She confessed that she was a perfectionist. From my classroom observations, she would be frustrated if she ever got any problems incorrect and was very critical of her performance. This was also reflected in her willingness to challenge herself in school. During the 2020-2021 school year, she took a rigorous set of honors classes. However, there were some classes where the teachers were inflexible with her absences, and she got behind in those courses. This triggered her anxiety and led to feelings of self-doubt and negative self-worth. Absenteeism was the easiest pathway to reduce her anxiety and negative feelings during remote learning. At home, she engaged in activities (see Figure 4.3) to reduce the mounting stress from school. Additionally, she could complete any of the missing work in her own time once she started feeling better. This way, she would still be able to maintain good grades which helped her mental health.

Grades were important to Tessa. She had the long term goal of going to her dream university and starting up a boutique with her future family. Her future boutique would help support herself, her future family, and her community. When Tessa endured suicidal ideation, she thought about her dream future. To her, school provided the *only* avenue to secure it. So, Tessa needed to get strong grades or risk losing her future. However, the barrier to good grades and a desirable future was homework and classwork (see Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4 Tessa's homework and classwork**

If she missed her classes, then she still had to make up her homework and classwork to maintain her grades. However, she sometimes did not understand how to complete the homework. For her, getting help for homework was difficult.

During her most challenging classes, she endured, or missed entirely, an onslaught of content-based lectures which led to confusing or incorrect conceptualizations of the discussed topics. It made Tessa feel overwhelmed because she was not performing the tasks perfectly. A spike of anxiety would occur. Negative, harmful, racing thoughts entered her head and got louder as the stressors ballooned. With remote learning, she just simply left Zoom and referenced in future classes that internet issues led to her absenteeism. During in-person learning, Tessa would check to see if a counselor was available to help her manage her worsening mental health. However, if there were no available counselors for Tessa to see, then she went to the bathroom and cried until she felt better (see Figure 4.5).

**Figure 4.5 Lecturing, confusion, and crying**

If that did not help, she investigated having her guardian pull her out of school. She also commented how easy it was to get out of school which further motivated her willingness to remove herself from a negative situation.

When she did return to school, it was hard for her to get help from teachers. For her, the best time for her to get help was after school, but several of her teachers had coaching responsibilities then. It was also not possible for her to get help before school. So, there was no time for her to get assistance on her classwork. Tessa's anxiety spiked during these instances which led her wanting to escape the anxiety she felt through absenteeism.

However, the school environment promoted social affordances towards Tessa's achievement-of-agency through school attendance. Some of her teachers prioritized her mental health and postponed her classwork until she was feeling better. They also considered that she was a Student of Color and were flexible with her unique needs. For example, she cited a former middle school social studies teacher that reached out to gauge Tessa's comfort level when talking about slavery.

Moreover, Tessa enjoyed some of her classmates. She always considered who was or was not going to be at school when making the decision if she wanted to attend school that day. It was easier to make the decision to come to school if she knew her collection of reliable friends was also going to be there. I remembered how comfortable she was with her group of peers when in my classroom. She seemed to genuinely enjoy being at school when working with peers. The self-doubt talk that plagued some of our one-on-one conversations was not present when she was with her peers.

The school environment presented restraints on her mental health and, consequently, her achievement-of-agency through school attendance. There were minimal outlets to resolve her mental health issues in school. When Tessa achieved agency through absenteeism, she performed tasks that reduced her anxiety and improved her mental health. She called these "mini breaks" and described them as "it's like winter break, but it's like really small. It's just one day, but it still feels like amazing and like it includes freedom." In a sense, absenteeism promoted her agency because she was afforded more opportunities to improve her mental health when outside of school.

## Grace

Grace was a junior during the 2020-2021 school year. Unlike the previous three participants, Grace was in a different chemistry section. She was in my smallest class. During remote learning, Grace started off the year inconsistent. She struggled with completing assignments and engaging in the learning activities. Her attendance was also inconsistent as well. She was one of the students who never had their web camera on and did not use the chat function. The only thing I knew about her during remote learning was her grade, and she started missing my class consistently after about a month of school.

When we went into the hybrid learning model, she was in a class of four students. I remembered being particularly anxious with this group of students because I did not know anything about them. However, much to my surprise, they were familiar with each other and excitedly engaged in the learning activities. Grace surprised me the most with how quickly and easily she breezed through the material. This was the complete opposite from my expectations which were solely based on her behaviors and actions during remote learning. She even helped her peers with classwork after she completed her work. This pattern continued through full in-person learning. While her attendance started to dip again in the last month of school, her performance did not. Grace agreed to be included in the study, submitted the signed assent form, and completed the data collection activities. As with the previous participants, Table 4.4 displays the conceptualization of the themes for Grace.

**Table 4.4 Conceptualization of themes - Grace**

| Themes | Categories | Code descriptions and sample quotes | Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Persistent anxiety, stress, social pressure, and fatigue | Fatigue | Grace's fatigue and school contributing to her fatigue.<br><br>"I'm very tired. I just want to go home and take a nap or give my brain energy." | Tired<br>Burden<br>Need breaks |
| | Pressure to perform well from herself and others | The social pressure Grace experienced.<br><br>"So, me, I was like, the special kid is always like getting A's and B's and stuff. So, it was just like I had to carry that through high school. So, there's just a lot of pressure from my parents to do good, I guess." | "I was the special kid."<br>Parental expectations<br>Pressure to do well from parents and friends<br>Better grades = better self-esteem<br>Bad grades are embarrassing<br>Good grades appeal to parents and friends |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Anxiety | Grace's anxiety.<br><br>"For me, and a lot of my friends and stuff, we have anxiety in general about being able to get out of bed and stuff like that. So that's probably one of the big ones. And it's just like if you have a test that you didn't study for. Then you stay home and then being able to make up that test or something on another date. And more time to study and get a better grade on it and stuff like that." | Stressful<br>Anxiety |
| Social and instructional enjoyment | Classroom activities | Grace's instructional activities in school.<br><br>"I try my best and then most of the time I get like a C or B then because like I, I try my best, but it's just hard to focus in on those classes because they don't bring me as much entertainment, I guess, as the other ones that I'm interested in." | Likes learning<br>Some classes don't bring entertainment<br>Some classes are "mind working like they bend your mind a lot to figure out certain things." |
| | Social opportunities | The social opportunities presented at school.<br><br>"Because at home you don't have the opportunity to see your friends because you have things to do at home, like homework, chores or like taking care of siblings and stuff. So at school you can see them and might talk about | Social<br>Friends<br>Hanging out |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | things that you find interesting or stuff like that." | |

The theme, "Persistent anxiety, stress, social pressure, and fatigue," magnified a tension between social expectations and academic performance. The academic performance and social expectations created a tension between school attendance and absenteeism. When her academic performance was high, the social expectations were met, and Grace attended school. However, when her academic performance was low, the social expectations were not met; this led her to absenteeism. Adding to this tension was the potential for social and instructional enjoyment. If classes presented her with social and instructional enjoyment, it shifted her agency toward school attendance. If the classes had a history of lacking social and instructional enjoyment, she engaged in absenteeism. The following subsections illustrate these conditions and how they shifted her intentionality toward or against school attendance or absenteeism.

### Persistent anxiety, stress, social pressure, and fatigue

Grace felt pressured from her friends and family to be successful in school. She felt better when her grades were high, and poorly when her grades were low. When she was feeling better, she had more energy and enthusiasm, but when she was feeling poorly, she felt fatigued and exhausted. When she felt anxious, she had difficulties completing basic tasks like getting out of bed in the morning. She attributed that her feelings came from her family's expectations. She explained:

> Especially with me, because my oldest sister, she had some sort of learning disability, so she was, I don't want to say, in special ed classes, but she had like a para or something with her. And my middle sister didn't do any of her schoolwork [and] almost failed all her

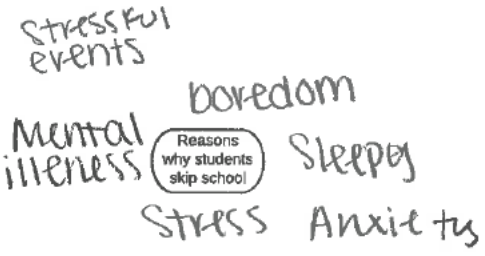
classes. So, me, I was like, the special kid. . . always like getting A's and B's and stuff. So, it was just like I had to carry that through high school. So, there's just a lot of pressure from my parents to do good, I guess.

Her parents expected good grades and reprimanded her when she performed poorly. The expectations motivated her to attend school because she wanted to get good grades. When her parents were happy with her performance, she felt better about herself.

These social pressures did not stop with her parents. She wanted to have good grades because her friends made her feel embarrassed otherwise. Grace stated, “Sometimes, it’s like embarrassing, I guess, to say you have a bad grade in a class that some people find easy.” Together, these two social pressures helped her achieve agency through school attendance to prevent the negative feelings and interactions that come from poor school performance.

However, school also induced feelings of stress, anxiety, sleepiness, boredom (see Figure 4.6) which in turn motivated her to skip school.

**Figure 4.6 Grace's motivation for skipping school**




Grace, like Marble and Tessa, suffered from anxiety during the 2020-2021 school year. Her mother and older siblings also endured the symptoms from anxiety. Her anxiety became more noticeable as she got older and materialized as fatigue. It was easier for her to stay in bed and make up the work later as opposed to dealing with school’s stressors. Grace even

recommended that students should be given more breaks, so students "have a break from lectures and the stress from tests, quizzes like and assignments and stuff like that."

Thinking back to when she was in my classroom, she complained about her fatigue. However, she felt like she had to be in school because her challenging classes were that day, and she could not skip her tough classes. To me, she was contemplating her affordances and constraints. If she was at school, she was going to endure negative feelings of anxiety, stress, and fatigue. However, if she went home, she still had to deal with social pressure and the stress of making up work. It was a daily endeavor for her which made her more exhausted.

It did not always used to be like this; Grace stated that she used to enjoy school. However, the added pressure of getting a high GPA while the classes became more challenging made school increasingly stressful. This fed into her anxiety and fatigue, and consequently, led to her not attending school. She primarily used fatigue as justification for getting out of school. Alternatively, during remote learning, she had the ability to rest and sleep because her parents worked. It also resolved the aforementioned negative feelings. If work was made up and her grades did not drop, then missing school was a viable, and sometimes optimal, option. She could sleep and temporarily ward off the fatigue that surrounded her. When understanding her achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism, Grace had to weigh the amount of fatigue that she was enduring. Anxiety, fatigue, and stress were lower outside of class but the social pressure to perform well increased due to lower performance. The inverse was true when achieving agency through school attendance.

### Social and instructional enjoyment

Grace was selective of the classes that she attended or missed. Grace was always interested in history and the arts. She enjoyed these classes, and consequently, she always tried to

attend them regardless how she felt. Moreover, she enjoyed classes where the instructional strategies were geared more towards kinesthetic learners (e.g., movement during class, coloring opportunities, collaboration, hands-on learning, experiential learning). However, there were certain classes that were challenging, and they accelerated feelings of fatigue and anxiety.

Primarily, these classes utilized lectures and required more steps or thought. They did not come as easily. During remote learning, teacher-led instruction was pervasive. Grace did not find this type of instruction interesting or effective. If lecturing was extensive, Grace disengaged by either leaving, getting on her phone, or doodling. Her detached behavior during the lectures helped improve her feelings of fatigue and anxiety. However, her attitude shifted when she was in control of her learning (e.g., student-led instruction). It was easier to focus on the task as opposed being distracted by feelings of anxiety and fatigue.

When Grace worked with her peers, she was given a jolt of energy. In the remote learning environment, she did not feel connected to her peers even when in classes with her friends. With in-person learning, she was able to talk and be around friends. In elementary and middle school, she had more opportunities and time to hang out and socialize with friends. These experiences contributed to her overall enjoyment in school. However, high school diminished these opportunities of socialization with her peers.

Grace's agency was achieved through school attendance when the environment presented opportunities for socialization or student-led instruction. However, when these opportunities were reduced or eliminated, Grace found the coursework uninteresting. With the school not providing any form of enjoyment or socialization (i.e., remote learning), she decided to skip school and attend to her symptoms of fatigue.

## Summary of findings

I collected the data through three elicitation activities. Next, I analyzed the data using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis allowed me to observe the contextual factors leading to the achievement-of-agency through either school attendance or absenteeism for each participant. Teacher and peer interactions enabled Marble to achieve agency through school attendance. Marble enjoyed her social interactions at school. However, the cycle of anxiety and ADHD and the increased autonomy and responsibilities promoted Marble to achieve agency through absenteeism. With increased stressors, anxiety, responsibilities, and accessible avenues to miss school, Marble achieved agency through absenteeism.

Kara's illnesses and ailments provided a constraint on her achievement-of-agency through school attendance and promoted her achievement-of-agency through absenteeism. However, Kara perceived the learning environment to be enjoyable, positive, necessary, and easy; this belief promoted her achievement-of-agency through school attendance. These feelings rewarded attendance because she was praised by her peers and teachers. School attendance also helped her get closer to achieving her long-term goal of being a surgeon. Additionally, family stressors also promoted Kara's achievement-of-agency through school attendance, so she could protect her brother and attain autonomy from her stepfather.

Feelings of being different and the school's predominantly negative influence on her mental health encouraged Tessa to achieve agency through absenteeism. Teachers, peers, and adult figures promoted her agency through school attendance if they helped Tessa feel safe and understood. Additionally, the school environment helped Tessa get closer to her long-term goals. If teachers, peers, and adult figures made Tessa feel unsafe and there were no avenues for stress

to be relieved at school, Tessa achieved agency through absenteeism, so she could be in an environment where she could feel safe and de-stress.

Finally, escaping anxiety, stress, social expectations, and fatigue encouraged Grace to achieve agency through absenteeism. Alternatively, social and instructional enjoyment encouraged Grace to achieve agency through school attendance.

Each theme presented an explanation as to why the participants engaged in school attendance or absenteeism. The final chapter, Chapter 5, connects the findings to previous research and the ecological agency framework. Chapter 5 also provides the study's implications and recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 5 - Discussion, implications, and conclusion

## Introduction to discussion, implications, and conclusion

In this chapter, I summarize the findings from the study, connect the themes to previous student absenteeism literature, identify consistencies and inconsistencies between the themes and previous student absenteeism literature, juxtapose the findings onto the ecological agency framework, provide the implications of the study's findings toward school policy and teacher practice, and discuss recommendations for future research.

All four participants were absent 10% or more school days during the 2020-2021 school year and shared their past and present experiences and future aspirations to observe the interworking of their individual agency. The themes represented the ecological factors that were collected during data analysis. Figure 5.1 presents the summary of themes from each participant.

**Table 5.1 Summary of themes**

| Participant | Theme (i.e., ecological condition linked to school attendance/absenteeism) | Explanation of ecological condition leading to school attendance/absenteeism |
|---|---|---|
| Marble | Teacher and peer relations | Positive teacher and peer relations led to school attendance. A lack of teacher and peer interactions led to school absenteeism |
| | Escaping the anxiety-ADHD loop | Anxiety and ADHD amplified each other. To escape this loop, she engaged in absenteeism. |
| | New autonomy and responsibilities | When Marble had more autonomy and responsibilities, she engaged in absenteeism. When Marble had less autonomy and responsibilities, she engaged in school attendance. |
| Kara | Physical health | Physical pain and ailments prevented her from attending school. |
| | The learning environment is enjoyable, positive, necessary, and easy | School was necessary for future success. Learning was also enjoyable, did not take much effort to have success, and led to intrinsic rewards. |
| | Family stressors | Kara wanted to get away from her stepfather, and the primary method for getting away from her stepfather was attending school. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Additionally, she felt the need to attend school to support her brother, who has social and emotional mental health challenges. |
| Tessa | "I am different." | Bullying, racism, and negative social interactions led Tessa to feel like she was different from everyone else. She escaped this feeling by engaging in absenteeism. |
| | High school stressors and mental health | Tessa saw school as the only pathway to a positive future and put significant stress on herself to be perfect with classwork. Without consistent supports to help her with her classwork, the school harmed Tessa's school performance, which in turn, led her to worsening mental health issues. She escaped these mental health issues through absenteeism. |
| Grace | Persistent anxiety, stress, social pressure, and fatigue | Social and school stressors heightened Grace's anxiety. Grace's anxiety amplified her fatigue, which she escapes through absenteeism. |
| | Social and instructional enjoyment | Student-led instruction and social opportunities led to school attendance. Teacher-led instruction and minimized social opportunities led to absenteeism. |

While agency, and the achievement-of-agency, always manifests in unique situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007), there were similar ecological conditions that shifted the participants' intentionality. Specifically, there were similarities found within the participants' environment, history, and aspirations. Social relationships/ stressors, methods of instruction, types of learning environment (i.e., remote and in-person learning), anxiety, and availability of space to escape anxiety shifted the intentionality of the participants either toward or against school attendance or absenteeism. The discussion section juxtaposes the findings and previous literature and builds upon the understanding of previous findings. Then, the discussion section further builds upon previous research by analyzing the findings through the ecological agency theoretical framework to better understand the institutional affordances and constraints

upon student intentionality toward school attendance or absenteeism. Next, the implication section discusses how changes in the school environment (i.e., school policy and teacher practice) can better promote school attendance. Finally, recommendations for future research are explored.

## Discussion

The goal of my research overlaps with one of the goals from other absenteeism research: identifying conditions that influence school attendance rates. First, my research builds upon previous research by illustrating the complexities associated with student absenteeism and examining the absentee students' daily decision-making. The discussion section illustrates the consistencies and inconsistencies found between my study's findings and findings with previous school attendance research. Second, my research also builds upon student absenteeism research by further analyzing my results through the ecological agency theoretical framework. The ecological agency theoretical framework helps decipher how school policies, environmental beliefs, and teacher practices shift intentionality towards (or away from) school attendance or absenteeism.

When analyzing the themes, there are commonalities between the participants' conditions leading to school attendance or absenteeism and previous student absenteeism research findings. The themes, escaping the anxiety-ADHD loop (Marble), family stressors (Kara), high school stressors and mental health (Tessa), persistent anxiety, stress, social pressure, and fatigue (Grace), are similar because, in some capacity, they relate to stress and mental health. Previous literature identified that stress (Gonzálvez et al., 2018; Gonzálvez et al., 2019) and mental health problems such as anxiety (Balkis et al., 2016; Gonzálvez et al., 2018; Gonzálvez et al., 2019; Inglés et al., 2015; Ingul et al., 2019; Gubbel et al., 2019; Kearney 2001, as cited in Kearney et

al., 2004; Kearney & Albano, 2004) influence student absenteeism. My research supports the results indicated by previous research. However, my research uniquely illustrates the participants' feelings of stress and anxiety. For Marble, being unable to focus on teacher-led instruction caused persistent thoughts of inadequacy that amplified and magnified her anxiety. She felt unintelligent which led to embarrassment in her social circle (e.g., parents and friends). Kara felt social pressure to protect her brother from his self-harm behaviors. Her protection manifested in the form of going to school to be there physically for her brother in case something happened. Tessa felt that she had no choice but to get excellent grades in all her classes. If she did not, she felt that she was not capable of performing well. She sought for help, but if help was unattainable, then her ideal future evaporated. The fear of losing this ideal future caused harmful thoughts to enter her mind. If the counselors were not available to help, then she left school to escape the harmful thoughts that she manifested. Finally, Grace's anxiety felt exhausting. Her parents and social circle wanted her to perform well in school, but it promoted additional stressors for Grace. The additional stress triggered her anxiety and led to feelings of fatigue and sleepiness. The feelings were hard to resist, so she engaged in absenteeism to rid herself of the fatigue and sleepiness.

Each participant's stress and anxiety manifested in a different manner. My dissertation complexifies the understanding of anxiety and stress leading to student absenteeism. It provides specific descriptors over the manifestation of anxiety (e.g., negative self-worth, self-talk, exhaustion, loss of future). It also provides how others support the mental health of their friends or family (e.g., Kara's protection over her brother). To that effect, my dissertation illustrates the different avenues that anxiety can be manifested in absentee students.

ADHD is a risk factor for student absenteeism (Kent et al., 2011). Additionally, anxiety and depression are comorbidities of ADHD (Muhammad et al., 2011). However, research has not illustrated the feedback loop found between ADHD and anxiety. Marble suffered from both ADHD and anxiety. Her anxiety worsened her ADHD, and her ADHD worsened her anxiety. Perpetual negative thoughts and feelings harmed her until she had no choice but to escape school. Absenteeism would break the ADHD-anxiety feedback loop, and school attendance would reform this cycle. The study understands that ADHD and anxiety work together to constrain the option of school attendance for students.

Relationships and social circles are another commonality shared between the participants that motivated or discouraged school attendance or absenteeism. Student-peer relations (Marble), feelings of being different (i.e., "I am different.") (Tessa), instructional and social enjoyment (Grace), and family stressors (Kara) relate to the students' social capital. Positive (and negative) peer interactions lead to increased (or decreased) school attendance (Havik et al., 2015). My research illustrates the specific social interactions leading to school attendance and absenteeism.

To expand over each participants' social capital, Marble needed peer interactions to motivate her to come to school, so she could see friends that she would have not seen otherwise. During remote learning, Marble was unable to physically be around her friends. She felt isolated and alone. Without authentic peer interactions, it was easier for her to make the decision to miss school. Grace also had a similar situation, but being around her peers gave her energy that she did not have. Without her friends or peers, the school day was longer and more tiring. This led her to missing school so she could sleep and feel less fatigued.

Tessa was unique because social interactions led her to miss school. She endured bullying. Hateful remarks toward her race and family made her feel unsafe and unwanted at

school. The social interactions made her feel different from her peers, and she desired for an environment where she was not different. For Tessa, home, not school, provided that environment.

For Kara, she wanted to feel free of the ever-watching eyes of her stepfather. School provided an easy, critique-free avenue for escaping him. Additionally, she felt the need to be at school to provide support for her brother. Her brother did not like school and had a history of self-harm. Kara wanted to be at school to prevent her brother from harming himself. From Kara's perspective, her family motivated her to go to school because she wanted to around her brother but *not* be around her stepfather. School provided the outlet for both conditions.

Positive (or negative) teacher interactions motivate increased (or decreased) school attendance (Gubbel et al., 2019). My research, once again, illustrates these teacher interactions and their influences on attendance. Marble was motivated to continue coming to school when her teachers explicitly praised her work. It improved her self-worth and gave her confidence that she could complete the classwork and homework effectively. Kara was like Marble. She enjoyed the rewards from teachers for performing quality work. Teachers always praised Kara for her hard work and effectiveness for getting work made up. Both have a positive rapport with their teachers.

Tessa had mixed feelings about her teachers. She felt unsupported by teachers who were not flexible with her mental health needs or absenteeism issues. She further felt unsupported if challenging classes did not have any readily available help to improve her grades. However, Tessa had teachers who assisted her and valued her mental health and absenteeism needs. She trusted these teachers to be a reliable source of help. Teachers that were unsupportive gave her

anxiety which led to absenteeism. On the opposite side, teachers who supported her needs reduced her anxiety and motivated her to come to school.

Positive (or negative) parent/guardian interactions and living situations lead to increased (or decreased) school attendance (Gubbels et al., 2019; Henry, 2007). Particular living situations (e.g., lives with no parents, lives with father or stepfather only, lives with mother or stepmother only, lives with a mother/stepmother or a father/stepfather) result in decreased attendance for the student (Henry, 2007). However, Kara's negative interactions with her living situation, specifically her stepfather, led to an *increase* of school attendance. She wanted to escape her stepfather's omnipresence because he persistently wanted to know every detail in her life. If there was something that her stepfather did not like, he intervened. Kara craved autonomy, and her stepfather failed to provide her with autonomy. One method of escaping her stepfather was by attending school. Her stepfather condoned going to school, so her stepfather did not follow up if Kara attended school. Thus, her living situation with her stepfather increased her desire and motivation to attend school.

Lecturing leads to student absenteeism in college-based lectures (Desalegan et al., 2014); however, the literature review does not capture the influence of lecturing and other instructional activities on student attendance/absenteeism in the high school context. For Grace, she obtained instructional enjoyment during hands-on, student-led instruction. Socialization, control over learning, and manipulatives in her classes made her excited to attend school. However, when teaching was primarily done through lecturing and other teacher-led instruction, it made her fatigued. With Grace feeling intense fatigue already, going to classes with lecturing promoted her fatigue. In turn, heightened fatigue led to increased absenteeism.

Marble also did not enjoy lecturing. With her ADHD, Marble was not able to focus on the content, and she consistently missed important material. When attempting the classwork and homework, she performed poorly. This led to her symptoms of anxiety (e.g., negative self-worth, sadness, frustration). Lecturing harmed her mental health, so she escaped lecturing through absenteeism.

Illnesses lead to student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008b). Kara's physical constraints reaffirmed the literature review's findings through her own physical ailments. Kara had many preexisting conditions, which manifested in profound physical pain. The physical conditions were painful to the point that she could not concentrate on her learning in the school environment. Thus, she left school, so she could focus on improving her physical health.

Finally, the literature review failed to illustrate the effect of familial roles upon the absentee student. In the case of Marble, she had to supervise her younger siblings during remote learning which led to loss of learning, anxiety with the loss of learning, increased distractions amplifying her ADHD, and missed class time. She also had more autonomy due to her new roles. When Marble returned to in-person learning, she did not have to be a caretaker for her younger siblings. Moreover, she had less freedom within the in-person school environment. Focusing on school was easier with in-person learning because there were fewer responsibilities for her to attend to and less freedom to make her own decisions.

When juxtaposing the previous absenteeism literature with my results, several themes overlap with influential factors from previous research. Anxiety, stress, ADHD, social capital, and illnesses are identified as factors contributing to student absenteeism. However, my study illustrates these conditions to provide a deeper understanding of what these conditions look like within my context. However, my study identified that teacher-led instruction motivated student

absenteeism, and student-led instruction motivated student attendance. Additionally, my study also identified that more familial responsibilities and autonomy encouraged student absenteeism, but fewer familial responsibilities and autonomy discouraged student absenteeism. However, the interplay of these conditions led the participants to engage in either school attendance or absenteeism.

## Connecting the study to the ecological agency theoretical framework

The themes offer an understanding into why Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry students choose the action of school attendance or absenteeism. The findings also build upon or reinforce literature by providing an illustration of conditions leading to their decision to attend or miss school. Additionally, it is important to understand the conditions influencing their attendance due to the negative short-term and long-term outcomes associated with student absenteeism. Understanding these conditions, specifically the details uniquely provided in this study, supply an avenue through the ecological agency theoretical framework to modify or change the students' intentionality which led to their decision to attend or miss school by implementing new policies and practices within the school environment. Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 137) shared that, "[The] actor always act[s] by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment. [Thus,] the achievement-of-agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations." In application, there are shifts within a person's action as the person responds to their environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In turn, the environment also responds to the person's action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The interplay of the person's personal history, aspirations, and environmental conditions provide potential outlets or restrictions to their

intended action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). To that effect, the ecological agency framework helps understand the intentionality of a person's action through the lens of an evolving environment; in other words, ecological agency magnifies the relationship and interplay between the environment and the action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The environment introduces and combines cultural (e.g., ideas, values, discourses, beliefs), social, and material resources to a person's personal history and aspirations (Biesta et al., 2015). Together, these inform the intentionality and decision-making of the person, and in the end, how they achieve agency (i.e., their action) within their environment (Biesta et al., 2015).

When juxtaposing the ecological agency theoretical framework and the participants' action of attending or missing school, the framework provides a unique perspective of understanding the environment and action interplay. Our school environment evolved from a remote learning environment to an in-person learning environment during the 2020-2021 school year. The ecological agency theoretical framework illustrates how different ecological conditions motivated a participant's intentionality and action. Specifically, the changes from the remote to in-person environment, along with the participants' shifting actions between absenteeism and school attendance when changing school environments, illustrate these ecological conditions as modifiers to their intentionality and decision-making in relation to school attendance. If we can identify the ecological conditions manifesting the actions of attendance or absenteeism, we can implement interventions to improve the attendance of students.

Citing my prolonged engagement, reflection and reflexivity, classroom observations, and memos, along with the students' experience and perspective that were gathered during the data collection, I identified the cultural, structural, and material resources found within our school during remote and in-person learning to more thoroughly illustrate how the school environment

influenced each participant's intentionality and decision-making during the 2020-2021 school year.

### Cultural resources

To reiterate, the "cultural resources" component of the environment is the shared system of beliefs found within an environment (Biesta et al., 2015). Table 5.2 summarizes the cultural resources found in the remote and in-person learning environments.

**Table 5.2 Cultural resources found in the learning environments**

| School environment | Cultural resources that afford or restrict school attendance or absenteeism |
|---|---|
| Remote learning (September 2020 – February 2021) | Easy outs for leaving class (e.g., internet not working, physical pain from screentime); administration stressed "grace" and staff (typically) fulfilled the request<br><br>Lack of shared experience with remote teaching strategies<br><br>Little control over student-led instruction |
| In-person learning (February 2021 – May 2021) | More challenging to leave class; "grace" was not stressed by administration; previous beliefs re-manifested<br><br>Experience with in-person instruction<br><br>Control over student-led instruction |

When investigating the cultural resources found in the two learning environments, we see a shift in collective beliefs from both students and teachers from remote learning to in-person learning. The participants utilized direct methods (e.g., internet not working, fatigue from screen, emails sharing that they would not be in attendance) and indirect methods (e.g., not showing up, leaving Zoom without warning) to miss school during remote learning. For example, Marble knew that informing her teachers about internet issues resulted in an easy gateway to leaving the remote learning environment. It was a strategy that was effective in missing class while

minimizing the academic and social ramifications. From my perspective, we were told by my administration to have "grace" when it came to student attendance to provide empathy toward our students during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, if their internet was not working, it was encouraged to provide asynchronous classwork which ensured all students had an opportunity for success. Some teachers conformed to this policy and gave students exemptions on work or alternative classwork. Other teachers resisted this policy and required the full amount of work to be completed. The latter stressed out Marble and Tessa. In relation to my class, I always gave students approval for leaving class to meet their needs; I conformed to this "grace." From my perspective, my colleagues typically shared this belief during remote learning.

However, the collective beliefs changed when returning to in-person learning. The administrators stopped mentioning "grace" when communicating out their expectations (via weekly emails). This prevailing belief, which was manifested and maintained before remote learning, resumed. In short, there were consequences for students missing school. Classwork had to be made up in their entirety as opposed to modifying or exempting their classwork. For example, in my classroom, students would need to make up labs which necessitated time before or after school. The removal of this unique "grace" led to harmful consequences towards students' grades. Every participant valued their grades, so they needed to attend school to prevent their grades from dropping. Through this perspective, the lack of "grace" restricts the participants' achievement-of-agency through absenteeism due to the risk of harming their grades.

Additionally, my instruction during remote learning was primarily teacher-led instruction. At the beginning of the school year, our administrators initially mandated that students had to be on Zoom for the entire 83-minute period (though that was modified to 60-minutes of instruction on Zoom about one month later). Teachers, like myself, were unprepared

for the rapid shift to remote learning. I did not have the repertoire of instructional strategies in a remote environment compared to an in-person environment especially for 83-minute periods. To fill time, I lectured, and my colleagues lectured too.

Reflecting upon my experience during the school year, our professional development was moved to the beginning of the year to prepare for remote learning. The goal of the professional development was to prepare for remote learning with the stipulation that the curriculum should not be altered in a remote setting. We had three weeks of professional development to prepare remote learning activities that completed the intended state curriculum. However, during the school year, we did not receive instructional or curricular support to rectify or improve our instruction. Even though I know that teacher-led instruction can be ineffective, I had no other strategies, even when exploring different instructional activities on my own time for certain chemistry topics. We had to cover the required curriculum, and without support to assist with my instructional strategies, I relied at times on lecturing to cover the curriculum. My experience was shared by other teachers. They also had challenges developing instructional activities to provide student-led instruction and felt pressure to cover the same amount of curriculum that they usually covered despite working in a remote learning setting. It was reinforced by the minimal support provided by our district for improving our instruction. All participants shared that they endured lecture-heavy sessions during remote.

In Marble's case, lectures were challenging to focus on. For Grace, lectures put her to sleep. For Tessa, it stressed her out; the content was not easily accessible if she did miss school because teachers were not allowed to record their classes. In varying capacities, teacher-led instruction did not teach the participants the material. For Marble and Tessa, lecturing led to

stress and anxiety. They escaped their anxiety through absenteeism. In Grace's case, she fell asleep during lectures.

Compounding the issue of lecturing was distrust between staff and students. Specifically, teachers feared that students would do other things besides student-led activities during remote learning. Teachers, myself included, felt like they did not have control in a remote setting during student-led activities. They feared that students may not work on the intended task leading to wasted instructional time. Teacher-led instruction ensured that teachers had control of the instruction. The fear of losing control and lack of knowledge of other teaching strategies beyond teacher-led instruction led to the continuation of teacher-led instruction during remote learning. The in-person learning environment rectified this issue because teachers received control of the classroom and had more experience with utilizing student-led instruction. Consequently, students experienced more student-led instruction which afforded their achievement-of-agency through school attendance.

### Social resources

The "social resources" component understands that the environment presents relationships, roles, and power dynamics to people found within its structure (Biesta et al., 2015). Table 5.3 summarizes the social resources found in the remote and in-person learning environments.

**Table 5.3 Social resources found in the learning environments**

| School environment | Social resources that afford or restrict school attendance or absenteeism |
|---|---|
| Remote learning (September 2020 – February 2021) | Minimal socialization between teachers, students, and students' peers<br><br>Unable to get academic help<br><br>Bullying |
| In-person learning | Socialization between teachers, students, and students' peers |

| | |
|---|---|
| (February 2021 – May 2021) | Mixed perception with finding academic help<br><br>Bullying |

The remote learning environment presented restrictions to building relationships between students and teachers. When students logged onto Zoom, their microphones were muted. However, a prompt would come up asking for a student to turn on their video camera. However, our school did not mandate screens to be on. Thus, most of our students did not have their screens on. Students, including the participants, rarely engaged in any meaningful communication or dialogue between each other. Moreover, the only participant that consistently engaged with me in any capacity (i.e., chat) was Tessa. During many of my remote classes, I was the only person talking. Our collective perspective during remote learning was like watching a video – there was little interaction between teachers and students. For Grace, it took so much "brain energy" to focus with minimal social interactions that her fatigue overwhelmed her. With every day feeling the same in this capacity, the amount of fatigue grew the longer she was in a remote setting. Social interactions with Grace's friends gave her energy, not listening to somebody else talk. In a sense, remote learning was a barrier between social interactions. The students engaged in passive learning during their remote learning environment.

When returning to the in-person learning environment, all students received more instructional engagement which included whole class, small group, and peer discussions. Marble and Grace really enjoyed this shift because it was easier to focus; the instruction enhanced, rather than removed, their focus and energy. The environmental perspective illustrates the pervasiveness of passive learning in remote learning and the return of active learning in the in-person learning environment. All participants, in varying amounts, welcomed the return of

socialization with in-person learning; it motivated them to come to the school environment. Therefore, the presence of socialization pulled students towards school attendance.

However, not all socialization was positive. Tessa endured bullying in both learning environments because her peers made crude remarks or jokes about her appearance either directly to her or through a social media platform. The school environment was apathetic of these instances of bullying. Tessa learned early in her school career the apathy her schools had toward her bullies. Therefore, she would neglect to report her bullies. The persistence of bullying within the school environment restricted her achievement-of-agency toward school attendance. Absenteeism would prevent the in-person bullying, and school attendance promoted in-person bullying. Therefore, to avoid her bullies, she would engage in absenteeism.

In both learning environments, getting help on homework or classwork was a challenge. From my perspective, students rarely reached out to receive help in my chemistry class during remote learning. We had a seminar class during remote learning, but it typically was rest time for both students and teachers. Students had to check-in the first ten minutes of seminar and then could freely leave. Teachers had to stay on Zoom in case their students had questions on classwork, but we rarely got any students. It was socially understood, even implicitly, that this was a rest time for everybody.

When returning to in-person learning, we had to adjust our lunch schedule which meant that our third block classes were extended and now included our study hall class. To ensure minimal issues with COVID-19 contact tracing, our study hall period portion had a “no travel” policy. The “no travel” policy prevented students from going from one study hall to another to receive help from another teacher. The resolution was that teachers needed to be on Zoom, and if a student had a question, they could just hop onto their Zoom link. However, students were

embarrassed to get onto Zoom to receive help, so very few students took that opportunity. From my perspective, I never had one student hop on to receive help. Thus, if you, as a student, had questions for a teacher, you had to wait until after school or before school the next day. For Tessa, this was a problem. Tessa shared her experiences related to getting homework help during the 2020-2021 school year compared to previous years:

> So, in the younger grades and elementary and middle school, I feel like the, the work was a lot easier, and we did have seminar. So, it was easy to get help and be able to pass the classes like with higher grades. And so, now that you're in high school, and there's no seminar. It's just really no point. So, like, it motivates you to stay home because you could be doing anything instead of just failing your class.

Tessa's experience illustrates the ramifications of the lack of help or the perception of the lack of help. If the environment is not conducive to academic support or the perception of academic support, and students are not understanding the content, then why even try to attend school? This was the thought process from Tessa because her anxiety was elevated when help was readily unavailable. From this perspective, the inability to receive academic help motivated her achievement-of-agency through absenteeism because her anxiety increased to the point that school became unbearable.

### Material resources

The "material resources" component includes two conditions: the institution's resources and physical environment (Biesta et al., 2015). Table 5.4 highlights the material resources found in the remote and in-person learning environments.

**Table 5.4 Material resources found in the learning environments**

| School environment | Material resources that afford or restrict school attendance or absenteeism |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Remote learning (September 2020 – February 2021) | Classes occurred at home<br><br>Minimal teacher supervision<br><br>Lack of space to escape anxiety during Zoom sessions |
| In-person learning (February 2021 – May 2021) | Classes occurred within the classroom<br><br>More pronounced teacher supervision<br><br>Lack of space to escape anxiety inside the physical school environment |

During remote learning, students were not allowed to come to the high school to attend classes. Instead, they were asked to go to class remotely via Zoom. All the participants attended their Zoom classes within their homes and were physically isolated from their peers and friends. This led to other distractions for the participants. In Marble's case, one notable distraction was the new responsibility of solely caring for her younger siblings. Rather than engaging in the remote lessons, she would, at times, have to feed, clean up, or play with her siblings. Participants also used their home setting to meet their immediate needs (e.g., socializing via texting or Snapchatting on their phones, doodling, making some food to eat). If they wanted or needed to do something, they just did it. Grace used the home setting to sleep in much more than she would during in-person learning. She got up five minutes before her first class and then fell back asleep. Kara also slept during her classes. As the remote learning continued, these behaviors increased.

Additionally, there were times that the participants' internet stopped working. If it was not working properly for prolonged periods, they simply gave up and accepted that they would not be in attendance for the day. They rationalized that it was out of their control. Therefore, they did something else to pass their time in their homes. Learning at home restricted their

achievement-of-agency through school attendance occasionally because legitimate internet issues prevented the option to attend school. This was a well-known issue to all stakeholders in education and was taken advantage of by students. However, at some point, all the participants, also utilized internet issues as an excuse to leave school. Without the ability for teachers to verify their claims (along with actual instances of internet issues), participants used this excuse without repercussion.

Additionally, school at home afforded their achievement-of-agency through absenteeism because students had additional distractions that were not present in the in-person environment. These options were, in the participants' viewpoint, more viable for their immediate needs than what was presented in the remote classroom environment.

When returning to in-person learning, all participants had classes at the high school. This led to a shift of behaviors. They had to wake up earlier and had less agency to focus on other immediate needs. The supervision of teachers reduced their agency because, if they fell asleep or were not engaged in the learning activities, the teacher reprimanded them. However, in the remote learning environment, with students' web cameras off, the teachers did not respond to their slumber or disengagement because they had no idea what the students were doing.

Additionally, the participants got to see their friends at school. Grace and Marble both shared that the in-person school environment was the only location where they could see their friends. Some days, that was their only motivation to come to school. The remote learning environment prevented and restricted the opportunity for the participants to see their friends.

Finally, the remote learning space, and in-person learning space for Tessa, failed to create spaces for students to escape their anxiety. For example, Tessa became overwhelmed when she felt like she was not understanding the material. In remote learning, the easiest way to get away

from her anxiety was to first ask for help from her teachers. If they were unable to assist with her learning needs, the anxiety became overwhelming. She needed to escape the anxiety, but the remote learning environment was only worsening the anxiety. She knew if she missed school, then teachers would provide extensions. This gave her time to get the assignments completed. She would be able to leave class, do things to reduce her anxiety, and then re-engage in the assignment. Marble also did something similar during remote learning, but her anxiety was heightened from lecturing which led to her not understanding the material. Marble left the online learning environment as opposed to attempting to receive help because the lectures made her feel incapable of learning the material. Additionally, escaping the online learning space led to extensions with classwork which gave Marble a chance to learn the material on her own terms. The extensions themselves from leaving school, even if they did not complete the assignments, reduced their anxiety. It gave them the feeling that they had time to learn the material without seeing their grades drop. For both students, their agency was achieved through absenteeism because their grades would be better if they missed school. When missing school, they attended to their immediate needs and then would re-attempt to learn the material on their own.

Marble and Tessa had two different experiences when returning to the in-person learning environment. Marble shared that she was able to work closely with her teachers, most notably her math teacher, to improve her knowledge, and her grades, to a point where she was happy with her grades. The shift in the physical environment afforded her achievement-of-agency through school attendance because the school now provided an outlet to visit teachers physically to receive help. In turn, her grades improved which led to the continuation of receiving help when needed.

Tessa, however, was unable to find time to work closely with her teachers even in the in-person environment. She was only able to meet with her teachers after school. Unfortunately, some of her teachers were unavailable due to their coaching responsibilities. Incidentally, these were the teachers who taught the classes where she needed the most help. It gave her anxiety because she was unable to receive the help she needed for her grades. For example, in her math class, if she was unable to understand the content in class, Tessa felt that she was not going to get another opportunity to learn it. These experiences manifested into negative thoughts. The negative thoughts led to her wanting to cry. To escape her negative thoughts and the action of crying, she first sought her counselors. If they were busy, she would go into the bathroom, cry, and text or call her guardian to pick her up from school. If her guardian did not respond, she would use the side doors to leave school. Tessa did not have a space, neither in remote nor in-person, to go to when her anxiety was at its highest. In my class, she was able to receive personalized tutoring after school because I did not have any immediate responsibilities after school. However, the lack of consistency with opportunities of academic support fed into her anxiety. The lack of assistance and space to retreat in both learning environments afforded her achievement-of-agency through absenteeism because the lack of understanding led to anxiety, and she needed to escape the pain produced by her anxiety.

## Implications

To recap, the research's findings uniquely provide a detailed illustration of the factors encouraging or discouraging the action of absenteeism or school attendance. When connecting the themes to the ecological agency framework, we can better understand how the school environment influences the intentionality and action of school attendance or absenteeism. Therefore, shifts or changes within the environment, in the form of policies or interventions, may

either discourage intentionality towards absenteeism or promote intentionality towards school attendance. The interventions involve a mixture of research-based interventions and participant suggestions. The interventions section recaps each environmental resource (e.g., cultural, social, material) that influences the students' intentionality and suggests changes within the environment to improve attendance.

I address the collective teacher beliefs in the cultural resources first. The teachers, during remote learning, had a mixture of collective beliefs including a lack of trust toward student-led instruction, an increase of empathy, and a decrease of rigor. The use of teacher-led instruction, which manifested due to the teachers' distrust of student-led instruction in remote learning, led to a rise in anxiety of the participants. The option of leaving was promoted because teachers were willing to let students hop off Zoom to attend to their personal needs. Additionally, the classwork barrier was reduced when students were absent from remote learning. Together, they promoted the intentionality toward absenteeism. These three beliefs shifted when returning to in-person learning. While empathy decreased, trust and rigor increased. This led to more student-led instruction and improved academic performance. The shift back to in-person learning removed the students' option to leave to attend to their mental health needs; the only option was to focus exclusively on their academic performance.

The influence of teacher-led instruction led to less learning and lower academic achievement (i.e., poorer grades). Student-led instruction gave students a better conceptualization of the material which led to better academic achievement. The learning from student-led instruction provided more rigorous learning opportunities because student learning was happening within the classroom. Grace affirmed this stance by sharing, "I know there's things that need to be taught. I probably have more like, I don't want to say artsy, but like fun activities

for students, so they're more engaged during class and not having to just sit there the entire class period."

To that effect, the school environment needs to promote student-led instruction in any learning environment. Institutional implementations of weekly collaboration time, common planning periods, and co-teaching lead to instructional improvement (e.g., sharing successful instruction including student-led activities) which better promotes student learning (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Walther-Thomas, 1997). Institutional support for more student-led instruction, such as professional development toward student-led instruction, minimizing the penalty for trying new methods of instruction, and paying for lifelong learning opportunities, may also promote the inclusion of student-led instruction. Teachers need exposure to a variety of different instructional strategies in a remote learning environment to ensure that teacher-led instruction is not replicated in a remote setting; in turn, student performance may improve with the use of student-led instruction.

Space for socialization was a repeated condition found in the "social resources" component. Marble shared that, "I'd say another really, really big [recommendation to improve attendance] is to see friends and socialize with people." For her, school was a place to meet new people and spend time with old friends. Promoting productive socialization may be a consideration for both the classroom and school environments. In the school environment, providing a host of extracurricular programs, which are linked to improved school attendance (e.g., Holloway, 2002; McLure & McLure, 2000; Neild et al., 2019), may lead to more opportunities to socialize with others, and in turn, may also lead to a reduction of absenteeism. The school does not currently have any outlets for Marble's specific interests (e.g., video games, Dungeons and Dragons, drawing), so installing clubs focusing on her interests may also improve

her attendance. For classroom teachers, providing peer collaboration time may also motivate students to attend the classroom in an effort to promote socialization.

The school environment also failed to suppress peer-peer bullying, and Tessa experienced bullying within her school environment. Tessa's experience with bullying made her feel like she was different than the rest of her peers. She did not feel welcome by the school. Bullying is linked to student absenteeism (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017). Improving the school's culture and climate is a method of reducing incidents of bullying in schools (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017). Focusing on one-on-one relationships (e.g., building rapport with students), being a role model, teaching and implementing pedological strategies to reduce conflict (e.g., cooperative learning, conflict resolution, service-learning, moral dilemma discussions) including prosocial education (e.g., character education, social-emotional learning, mental health promotional efforts), having schoolwide support, creating space and opportunities for students to help students develop and maintain an identity and attachment to school, and promoting ownership among all stakeholders may improve school culture and reduce incidents in bullying (Cohen et al., 2009; Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Durham & Connolly, 2017).

Furthermore, the classroom environment can also help reduce the participant's stressors in relation to academic performance. Tessa had challenges with receiving in-person help with her learning needs. She expanded on her limited opportunities to get teacher help by stating,

> Because there is no seminar which we use to get help in. It's very limited to have teachers help you because a lot of teachers also coach sports. And so, to be able to also sit down with their students and go over something, it's really hard. And they always say, like, come in in the morning, but, like, [students] don't have cars, and their mom and dad can't take them. So, they ride the bus. And by the time that the bus gets there, it's too late to go

in and get help. . . It just adds a lot more stress. And when people are stressed and overwhelmed, why even try, you know.

Tessa felt restricted in part from the lack of academic assistance which led to magnified feelings of being overwhelmed. Therefore, for Tessa, there needs to be an in-person study hall period during school where she can get help if she needs it. If there is no help, then she struggles with handling the feelings of anxiety and self-doubt.

Finally, the "material resources" category presented a series of conditions that shifted the intentionality of the participants. The physical in-school learning environment restricted the achievement-of-agency through other avenues, whereas the remote learning environment failed to restrict the student's agency. For example, the participants could not sleep during class for in-person learning due to the repercussion of the teacher; however, this was a common outlet in the home learning environment. These distractions were harmful to their academic performances, and in turn, their self-worth. Therefore, it is my recommendation to have students in the in-person environment to better promote academic achievement. There are less distractions present with in-person learning because the teacher is there physically to abort any actions that are not related to the learning task.

The lack of space to escape the harmful manifestations of anxiety in both the in-person and remote learning environment restricted school attendance. Marble's anxiety manifested as racing thoughts, difficulty focusing, and harmful self-talk. Lecturing worsened these symptoms and added to her negative self-worth. She wanted to escape the anxiety, so she engaged in absenteeism. The in-person environment provided an outlet (i.e., the counselor's office) for leaving the anxiety-inducing class without leaving school itself. Marble utilized this outlet, but in

Tessa's case (who also endures waves of anxiety), she was not able to consistently meet with her counselor during school hours due to the lack of availability. Tessa stated,

> I think the school could do a little better like the counseling services. So, like, maybe hire more counselors because I see students all the time go cry in the bathrooms. Because the counselor is busy and like they're really struggling at that time. They can't go to class. So, like, they really don't have any other options. So, like, I like to help them, but I can only do so much because I'm not trained in that service. So, it's just really difficult when students, like, get to school, and they're overwhelmed. And they feel like they have no option. They go to see the counselor, and the counselor is busy. So, they're just… They're struggling, and just sometimes they skip school because, like, no one really likes crying in school, especially in your classes. So, I feel like hiring more counselors could be a very good idea. Um, there is also, like I said, a stigma on mental health. So, like maybe adding a few more study sessions, and maybe even like a mental health awareness class would be very beneficial because that could bring awareness to like people and how they can cope or how they can help their friend get through their struggles.

To reiterate, Tessa needed a place to escape to when she was struggling and did not have any place in the school to go to. Having a location (e.g., a trusted adult, counselor) where Tessa can retreat to within the school while enduring her mental health issues may help improve her attendance. Additionally, Tessa also provided suggestions related to improving mental health in the school environment (e.g., more counselors, in-person study hall, mental health awareness and visibility).

### Recommendations for future research

While the study discovered why students achieved agency through school attendance and absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school, there are several future research avenues of interest and need. First, the study captured the achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism with Gardner Edgerton High School chemistry absentee students. However, students experience different dynamics at different school locales, contexts, and levels (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Therefore, it is important that future research studies the conditions affording or restricting students' achievement-of-agency through school attendance or absenteeism at different school locales, contexts, and levels. Additionally, the four participants each were historically strong academic students. Their beliefs were collectively centered around the pursuit of high academic achievement. However, students with lower academic achievement have lower rates of attendance (Gottfried, 2010; Gottfried, 2014). Additional research capturing the decision-making of lower achieving students may be relevant in assisting with their particular needs. Finally, broad generalizations are not possible or practical when using case studies (Anderson, 2010). To help other school contexts beyond my own, and to understand the conditions motivating absentee student decision-making in a wider context, quantitative studies through an ecological agency approach may help improve school and classroom practice and policy in improving absenteeism.

## Conclusion

The study endeavored to understand why students achieved agency through school attendance and absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school. The cases in the study were Gardner Edgerton High Schools chemistry students. The results outlined several conditions that led to the achievement-of-agency through school attendance and absenteeism for all participants. While

many conditions outlined in the literature review were captured in the study, my case study provided a detailed illustration of these conditions along with the emergence of surprising conditions influencing the participants' daily decision to attend or miss school within the suburban, Kansas school context. The results and the theoretical framework were juxtaposed, which magnified the effects of the school environment upon school attendance. The implications section provided suggestions for school policy and classroom practice to improve school attendance at Gardner Edgerton High School.

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# Appendix A - Semi-structured interview

*Note: Interview questions will be selected from the list below and will be used as time allows. Some questions may not be used.

1. If you had the choice, would you attend school?
2. How do students skip school?
3. What do students do while they skip school?
4. Where do students go when they skip school?
5. What are your thoughts or your friends'/peers' thoughts about school and education?
6. When you were in elementary school, did you like school? If so, what did you like about school? If not, what did you not like about school? Did these events change your thoughts about school?
7. Since elementary school, did your views on school ever change?
8. What are some past experiences, feelings, or beliefs you think motivate students to attend school?
9. What are some past experiences, feelings, or beliefs that motivate students to skip school?
10. How is your current school year going? Is there anything you would want to change about it?
11. What are some current experiences, feelings, or beliefs that motivate students to attend school?
12. What are some current experiences, feelings, or beliefs that motivate students to skip school?
13. What are some future goals or experiences that motivate students to attend school?

14. What are some future goals or experiences that motivate students to skip school?

15. When you attend school, what do you hope to get from it?

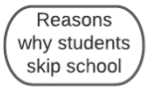
16. How do you think the school can help students not skip school?

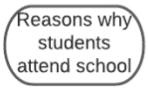
17. How do you think the school encourages students to skip school?

# Appendix B - Word web activity

For this activity, you are going to fill out a word web. You will write out as many words, events, experiences, or phrases as you can that are linked to the two categories. The first category is "Reasons why students skip school," and the second category is the "Reasons why students attend school." I will give you three minutes to fill out as much as you can. If you are done early or need more time, please let me know.

After completing the word web, we will talk about how you made your word web.



# Appendix C - Drawings

In the space below, you will be asked to create two drawings. Feel free to use any of the color pens, crayons, or pencils provided for your sketch.

Drawing #1: Draw a picture representing your (or your peers') experience at school.

Drawing #2: Draw a picture representing your (or your peers') experience when not attending school.

# Appendix D - Formal follow-up/Debriefing

Debriefing for: *An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school*

Thank you for your participation in this research. The goal of the study is to determine the decision-making of students who skip school. We looked at the audio data from the interview and two activities to understand how and why students make the decision to skip school. Specifically, we looked for patterns in the audio recordings to achieve the study's goal.

You may decide that you do not want your data used in this research. If you would like your data removed from the study and permanently deleted, please let me (Mr. Kipp) know.
If you are okay with the data remaining in the study, we can discuss the data at this time, and if you agree or disagree with the results.

Lower school attendance is typically related to more negative short-term and long-term outcomes. We want to prevent or remedy attendance issues. We hope this information that we collected can help us better understand why students skip school. Specifically, we hope that this will lead to continued and sustained dialogue between students, teachers, and administrators to help us develop programs to improve attendance. These programs will target the reasons why you skipped school to help encourage future students to attend school more consistently.

The study will conclude in the spring of 2022. Following the conclusion of the study, we will destroy the audio recording. You were not identified at any point during the study and were given a fake name to ensure your identity will not be known. No additional risks, discomforts, or deceptions were anticipated at any point during the study. We intend this study to be published within the next couple of years.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final report of this study (or a summary of the findings) when it is completed, please feel free to contact Mr. Kipp at alkipp@ksu.edu. You may also contact that same email address if you have any additional questions.

Thank you!
Andrew Kipp, Ed.D. student

# Appendix E - Gardner Edgerton High School Administration approval



USD231
Gardner Edgerton School District

Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>

**Formal permission for the study - An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school**

3 messages

**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Thu, Mar 4, 2021 at 8:44 AM
To: Frank Bell <bellf@usd231.com>, Tanner Rainbolt <rainboltt@usd231.com>, Kelsey Bakalar <bakalark@usd231.com>, Scott Peavey <peaveys@usd231.com>, Anthony Taylor <taylora@usd231.com>, Melissa Veatch <veatchm@usd231.com>

Good morning administration team!

I hope that each of you are doing well and are ready for the transition to full in-person! It will be an exciting change, from my perspective, to have a learning situation that students are most acclimated to!

Anyway, speaking of learning situation, I have a request pertaining to my own learning. Right now, I am currently one year away from obtaining my Ed.D. degree from Kansas State University. With my coursework concluding this summer, the only other requirement standing between myself and graduation is my dissertation. Before I can conduct any research, I need to have my research approved from the district before I can move forward with getting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

To provide a short overview of my dissertation, I plan during the fall 2021 semester to interview students who have missed 10% or more school days during the previous school year (i.e., 2020-2021 school year). Specifically, I will be exploring their past and present experiences and future goals of these students. This dialogue can help us understand the decision-making of absentee students and thus help us create interventions targeted towards their needs.

To explore their past and present experiences and future goals, I will be conducting two data collection sessions. The first data collection session includes a semi-structured interview protocol and two elicitation activities (which are short tasks to help the student reflect upon their own experiences, engage in reflexivity from those experiences, and promote continued dialogue). Please review the data collection protocol and activities document (attached).

The second data collection session will occur three weeks following the first session. The second data collection session will involve discussion (i.e., debriefing - attached) of the results collected from the first session to ensure validity of results. To recruit students, a $25 Amazon gift card will be given following the conclusion of the second data collection session.

To ensure confidentiality of students, pseudonyms will be provided to the participants. Moreover, audio data will be collected. Video data will not be collected. The audio data will be on stored on the cloud storage associated with my USD 231 account and will be destroyed following the conclusion of the study - which we anticipate to be spring 2022. All participants will fill out an IRB consent form before data collection (attached). If the participants are 18 years old or younger, they will need both parents/ guardians signature (unless their personal circumstances prevent this from occurring).

It should be noted that Gardner Edgerton High School will be referenced during the study to improve trustworthiness of the study.

**There's a lot of information here (I am making Frank's emails look short!). Here is what I need:**

**1. Explicit statement that you are aware of the study being conducted and if permission is or is not given from the administration team.**
**2. This statement must include my name (Andrew Kipp) and my principal investigator (J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D.)**
**3. The statement must also include the title of the study. The title is: An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school**

If you need more information before deciding, please let me know. Once your approval is given, I will reach out to Heather Peeke to ensure the district is also aware of the study.

Thank you everyone; you are very, very much appreciated!!

--

Andrew Kipp

*Chemistry Teacher*
*Doctoral Student - Curriculum and Instruction, Kansas State University*
*Teaching Assistant for Master of Arts in Teaching program, Kansas State University*
Gardner Edgerton High School
425 N. Waverly Road
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2600
usd231.com/o/gardner-edgerton-hs

**3 attachments**

**Debriefing for An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school study.docx**
14K

**Data collection activities, An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school.docx**
26K

**IRB Consent An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas School.docx**
36K

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**Frank Bell** <bellf@usd231.com> Thu, Mar 4, 2021 at 9:42 AM
To: Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>
Cc: Tanner Rainbolt <rainboltt@usd231.com>, Kelsey Bakalar <bakalark@usd231.com>, Scott Peavey <peaveys@usd231.com>, Anthony Taylor <taylora@usd231.com>, Melissa Veatch <veatchm@usd231.com>

Andrew Kipp,

I am aware of your study titled: *An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school*, and yourself (Andrew Kipp), and your principal investigator, J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D., have permission to proceed.

Good luck!

Frank Bell

**Frank Bell**
*Principal*
Gardner Edgerton High School
425 N. Waverly Road
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2600
usd231.com/o/gardner-edgerton-hs

[Quoted text hidden]

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**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Thu, Mar 4, 2021 at 1:01 PM
To: Frank Bell <bellf@usd231.com>
Cc: Tanner Rainbolt <rainboltt@usd231.com>, Kelsey Bakalar <bakalark@usd231.com>, Scott Peavey <peaveys@usd231.com>, Anthony Taylor <taylora@usd231.com>, Melissa Veatch <veatchm@usd231.com>

Awesome - thank you!
[Quoted text hidden]

# Appendix F - USD 231 approval



USD231
Gardner Edgerton School District

Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>

**Formal permission for the study - An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school**

9 messages

**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Thu, Mar 4, 2021 at 1:22 PM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Hi Heather,

I hope all is well with you as we make the transition to full in-person learning! It will be an exciting change, from my perspective, to have a learning situation that students are most acclimated to!

Anyway, speaking of learning situations, I have a request pertaining to my own learning. Right now, I am currently one year away from obtaining my Ed.D. degree from Kansas State University. With my coursework concluding this summer, the only other requirement standing between myself and graduation is my dissertation. I have communicated with the administration team at the high school (i.e., Frank Bell). They are aware of the study and have approved it (attached). However, before I can conduct any research, I need to have my research approved from the district before I can move forward with getting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

To provide a short overview of my dissertation, I plan during the fall 2021 semester to interview students who have missed 10% or more school days during the previous school year (i.e., 2020-2021 school year). Specifically, I will be exploring their past and present experiences and future goals of these students. This dialogue can help us understand the decision-making of absentee students and thus help us create interventions targeted towards their needs.

To explore their past and present experiences and future goals, I will be conducting two data collection sessions. The first data collection session includes a semi-structured interview protocol and two elicitation activities (which are short tasks to help the student reflect upon their own experiences, engage in reflexivity from those experiences, and promote continued dialogue). Please review the data collection protocol and activities document (attached).

The second data collection session will occur three weeks following the first session. The second data collection session will involve discussion (i.e., debriefing - attached) of the results collected from the first session to ensure validity of results. To recruit students, a $25 Amazon gift card will be given following the conclusion of the second data collection session.

To ensure confidentiality of students, pseudonyms will be provided to the participants. Moreover, audio data will be collected. Video data will not be collected. The audio data will be stored on the cloud storage associated with my USD 231 account and will be destroyed following the conclusion of the study - which we anticipate to be spring 2022. All participants will fill out an IRB consent form before data collection (attached). If the participants are 18 years old or younger, they will need both parents/ guardians signature (unless their personal circumstances prevent this from occurring).

It should be noted that Gardner Edgerton High School will be referenced during the study to improve trustworthiness of the study.

**There's a lot of information here, so here is what I need:**

**1. Explicit statement that you are aware of the study being conducted and if permission is or is not given from the district.**
**2. This statement must include my name (Andrew Kipp) and my principal investigator (J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D.)**
**3. The statement must also include the title of the study. The title is: An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school.**

If you need more information before deciding, please let me know. Moreover, if there are any concerns about any of the data collection methods or anything related to the surrounding study, I would be happy to discuss them.

With all that you have had on your plate this year, this is very much appreciated!

Thanks!
--

**Andrew Kipp**
*Chemistry Teacher*
*Doctoral Student - Curriculum and Instruction, Kansas State University*
*Teaching Assistant for Master of Arts in Teaching program, Kansas State University*
Gardner Edgerton High School
425 N. Waverly Road
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2600
usd231.com/o/gardner-edgerton-hs

**4 attachments**

**IRB Consent An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas School (1).docx**
36K

**Debriefing for An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school study (1).docx**
14K

**Data collection activities, An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school (1).docx**
26K

**Permission from Gardner Edgerton High School administration for dissertation.pdf**
218K

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**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Wed, Mar 10, 2021 at 7:51 AM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Hi Heather,

While I know it is a very busy time over at the district office, I wanted to check-in quickly since I have not heard back from you.

Let me know if you have any questions about the study!
[Quoted text hidden]

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**Heather Peeke** <peekeh@usd231.com> Mon, Mar 22, 2021 at 8:59 AM
To: Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>

Good Morning Andrew!

We've gone over your proposal at length and have several items that present issues. Let me know a time when you are available to chat.

Thanks,
-Heather

**Heather Peeke**
*Director of High School Educational Services and District Assessment Coordinator*
Administrative Offices
231 E. Madison Street
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2060
usd231.com

[Quoted text hidden]

**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Mon, Mar 22, 2021 at 9:10 AM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Hi Heather!

I appreciate you taking the time to review my study! I am available after school today at 3:10 pm; would that work for you? You are welcome to call my cell phone at 620-228-4490 or via Zoom using the link below:

https://ksu.zoom.us/j/9425692573

If you are unable to chat today after school, just let me know which times and days work best for you! I look forward to chatting with you!
[Quoted text hidden]

---

**Heather Peeke** <peekeh@usd231.com> Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 8:39 AM
To: Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>

Andrew-

I'm sorry I missed your call. I can chat today after 3:00 if you're available, I have some time before I do KSA Training. I should be in my office so feel free to call me at your convenience.

Have a great day!
-Heather

**Heather Peeke**
*Director of High School Educational Services and District Assessment Coordinator*
Administrative Offices
231 E. Madison Street
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2060
usd231.com

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---

**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 12:21 PM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Excellent!! I will call around 3:05 pm. Thanks again for the flexibility!
[Quoted text hidden]

---

**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Wed, Mar 24, 2021 at 3:13 PM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Hi Heather!

Thank you again for chatting with me yesterday! During our chat, we discussed the issues that were present in the study. These issues include:

1. Due to FERPA, a federal law, I am only permitted to study students that are currently on my roster.
2. Need to add that "parents/ guardians have the right to be involved in the data collection process if they choose to be included".
3. The study needs to be purely voluntary; no reward or incentive.
4. Being a teacher at the school, I am a mandatory reporter. So, I will need to report any criminal activity.
5. The only contextual factors that will be collected and reported during the study will be: grade level, past and present experiences, and future goals. The rest will not be documented to ensure safety and confidentiality of the participants.

To resolve each issue, the following has been added. These additions are highlighted to differentiate between prior text.

1. In the updated consent form, it has been added that the participants must be on my roster to ensure no violation of FERPA occurs.
2. In the updated consent form, it has been added that the parents/ guardians have the right to be involved in the data collection process if they choose to be included.
3. In the updated consent form and debriefing forms, all mentions of incentives have been removed. In the updated consent form, it is emphasized that no incentives will be given before, during, or after the data collection process.
4. In the updated consent form, there is now text added that informs the participant that I am a mandatory reporter and will report any criminal activity. This ensures that the participants and parents/guardians are aware of this stipulation.
5. In the updated consent form, there is now text added indicating the only information that will be collected and reports are: grade level, past and present experiences, and future goals. No other information will be collected or reported.

The data collection activities document and other attachments from the original email have remained unchanged. They have been reattached in case additional review is needed.

Let me know if there are additional issues that emerge or if anything additional is needed to get the study approved.

If the study gets approval, please send me an email with the following:

**1. Explicit statement that you are aware of the study being conducted and if permission is or is not given from the district.**
**2. This statement must include my name (Andrew Kipp) and my principal investigator (J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D.)**
**3. The statement must also include the title of the study. The title is: An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school.**

Thank you again for all of the help!

[Quoted text hidden]

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**4 attachments**

**Data collection activities, An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school (1) (1).docx**
26K

**Permission from Gardner Edgerton High School administration for dissertation (1).pdf**
218K

**(Incentive removed) Debriefing for An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban^J Kansas school study.docx**
14K

**Updated 03.24.21 IRB Consent An ecological agency approach to student absenteeism in a suburban^J Kansas School.docx**
37K

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**Andrew Kipp** <kippa@usd231.com> Mon, Apr 5, 2021 at 9:51 AM
To: Heather Peeke <peekeh@usd231.com>

Hi Heather,

Just checking in to see if there is any update at this time! Thanks!
[Quoted text hidden]

---

**Heather Peeke** <peekeh@usd231.com> Wed, Apr 7, 2021 at 12:12 PM
To: Andrew Kipp <kippa@usd231.com>

You've been approved.

Andrew Kipp has been approved to conduct the following study, under the supervision of J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D., during the 2021-2022 School year: An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school.

Let me know if you need anything else.
Have a great afternoon!

-Heather

**Heather Peeke**
*Director of High School Educational Services*
*and District Assessment Coordinator*
Administrative Offices
231 E. Madison Street
Gardner, KS I 66030
913.856.2060
usd231.com

[Quoted text hidden]

# Appendix G - IRB approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | University Research Compliance Office

TO: J. Spencer Clark
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number IRB-10672

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 04/19/2021

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "An Ecological Agency Approach to Understanding Student Absenteeism in a Suburban, Kansas School."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 04/19/2021

EXPIRATION DATE: 04/18/2024

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Rick Scheidt on 04/19/2021 3:29 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, Manhattan, KS 66502 | (785) 532-3224 | fax: (785) 532-3278

# Appendix H - Consent/ assent form

**PROJECT TITLE:**

An ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism in a suburban, Kansas school

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:** | 04/19/21 | **PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:** | 04/18/24 | **LENGTH OF STUDY:** | 5 months |

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** J. Spencer Clark, Ph.D.

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Andrew L. Kipp

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** alkipp@ksu.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

**PROJECT SPONSOR:** Kansas State University

**UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMPLIANCE OFFICE CONTACT INFORMATION:** comply@k-state.edu

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

**The purpose of this research is to understand the decision-making of students who decide to skip school. Specifically, we will talk with you about your past, present, and future to help us meet this goal.**

**(Note: This study is considered research, and thus, consent/assent is necessary for the research to be conducted.)**

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:**

**Andrew Kipp, a chemistry teacher at the site of the study (Gardner Edgerton High School in Kansas), will select students that are on his roster during the time of the study. Students who have skipped school during the 2020-2021 school year will be eligible for the study. Mr. Kipp will ask for the permission from the students and their**

**parents or guardians if they are not 18 or older. You are asked to be potentially included in this study. If you (and both parents/guardians if you are not eighteen, unless one parent/guardian is not available) opt-in the study, Mr. Kipp will check your attendance records to see if you are eligible for the study. If you skipped 10% or more of school days during the 2020-2021 school year, then you are eligible for the study.**

**Fake names will be given to you to keep you safe. Your parents/guardians have the right to be involved in any part of the study if they so choose. Again, Mr. Kipp must view your attendance to ensure that you qualify for the study. Your attendance will not be documented beyond simply being eligible for the study.**

**Once permission is given, we will select a time to meet. During the meeting, audio will be recorded. The audio will be saved on Mr. Kipp's Kansas State University secure, password-protected encrypted Zoom account. The audio data will be destroyed at the end of the study. No video will be used. There will be three data collection activities during the meeting. Before the data collection starts, Mr. Kipp will provide an overview of what is going to happen during the data collection process. Mr. Kipp will also inform you that he is a mandatory reporter due to his position at the school and will have to report any criminal activity to the school administrators and the school resource officer. The first data collection activity is a semi-structured interview. An interview protocol was developed though not all questions will be asked. The flow of the semi-structured interview is discussed next.**

**At the beginning of the interview, Mr. Kipp will chat with you about your life and your current experiences in school. Next, Mr. Kipp will talk about your past experiences and future goals to understand why some students choose not to go to school.**

**After the semi-structured interview, Mr. Kipp will use a brainstorming activity. This is the second data collection activity. The brainstorming activity will have you explore why you think your peers skip school. Finally, you will be asked to draw two pictures. This is the final data collection activity. The first picture is about your (or your peers') experiences at school, and the second picture is about your (or your peers') experiences with skipping school.**

**The interview, brainstorming activity, and drawings will help Mr. Kipp understand why students skip school. Finally, Mr. Kipp will give you a chance to ask any remaining questions. This first session should last around 30-minutes. Mr. Kipp will use the audio recordings to help answer the questions in his study. The brainstorming activity and the drawings will also be collected and used in the study. A follow-up interview will be scheduled at the end of the first interview.**

**After a couple of weeks, you will have a follow-up interview (called a debriefing) with Mr. Kipp. This follow-up interview will be used to share the results of the study. You will help Mr. Kipp by agreeing or disagreeing with the results. If you want to omit any information, you have the opportunity to do so. This follow-up interview should last**

**no more than 15 minutes. Only audio will be recorded in the same manner as the first session.**

**The interview recording will be destroyed after the study is complete.**
**You will be given a fake name to ensure confidentiality.**
**Participation is voluntarily at every point of the study. You can drop out at any point of the study.**

**BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED (Describe procedure, storage, etc.):**

**No biological samples will be collected. The only item that will be collected will be the audio recording, brainstorming activity, and the drawings that you provided during the data collection. The audio recordings will include your past and present experiences and future goals. Your grade level will be noted. The drawings and concept maps may be used in the study. Other characteristics will not be noted to make sure you cannot be identified in any way.**

**Whole genome sequencing will not be included as part of the research**

**You will be informed of clinically relevant results that are discovered as part of the research.**

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:**

Not Applicable.

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:**

There are no known risks, deceptions, or discomforts anticipated.

**BENEFITS ANTICPATED:**

The research will be used by other researchers and administrators to better understand why students skip school.
No incentives will be rewarded to the participants for engaging in the study.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:**

You will not be identifiable. You will have fake names so your real identity will not be known. The audio recording will be saved on Mr. Kipp's secure, password-protected, encrypted Zoom account through Kansas State University. (Note: End to end encryption will be used to prevent any potential data breaches.) The audio recording will be destroyed following the completion of the study. Only your school locale, grade level, past and present experiences, and future goals, drawings, and concept maps will be collected and reported in the study. Due to FERPA, a federal law, and at the request of the USD 231 school district, the only participants that Mr. Kipp may select are students that are currently on his roster during the time of the study. You fit this description. Mr. Kipp will need to view your attendance records to ensure you qualify for the study. No attendance rates will be documented or reported beyond qualifying for the study.

The drawings and concept maps will be stored in a cabinet in my classroom in Gardner Edgerton High School. The cabinet will be locked via a lock and key. I (Mr. Kipp) will only have access to the key to open the lock. There is only one key, and I will exclusively have it. Following the conclusion of the study, the drawings and concept maps will be shredded using a shredder.

**The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent.**

**IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS?** ☐ Yes ☒ No

**PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:**

**PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN(S) APPROVAL SIGNATURE:** _____ **DATE:** _____

_____ **DATE:** _____

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **PARTICIPANT NAME:** | | | |
| **PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:** | | **DATE:** | |
| **WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)** | | **DATE:** | |