Evaluation of professional school counselor led interventions on test scores for attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk truant high school students

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Entitled

Evaluation of Professional School Counselor Led Interventions on Test Scores for Attachment, Engagement, and Empowerment with At-Risk Truant High School Students

by

Layla Kurt

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Counselor Education

Dr. Martin Ritchie, Committee Chair

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July 2012
An Abstract of

Evaluation of Professional School Counselor Led Interventions on Test Scores for Attachment, Engagement, and Empowerment with At-Risk Truant High School Students

by

Layla Kurt

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Counselor Education

The University of Toledo
May 2012

Professional school counselors (PSCs) can play a vital role to help keep truant students in school by providing school-based interventions that target the personal barriers of attachment, engagement, and empowerment that may limit success in school. ASCA national standards encourage PSCs to demonstrate accountability for student outcomes. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) emphasizes the role of the school counselor in assisting students with academic performance and social and emotional well-being.

Based on attachment, engagement, and empowerment theories, this study seeks to understand the relationship between PSC led treatment and student (a) social bonds and support systems (engagement), (b) social skills development (attachment), (c) academic monitoring skills (engagement), and (d) personal self-awareness and self-regulation skills (empowerment) with at-risk high school students as defined by truancy. To this end, attachment, engagement, and empowerment have been measured before and after the implementation of PSC led school-based interventions.
For my husband, Chris, and our three boys, Ivan, Cohen, and Caleb with all of my love, and also to my parents who haven’t stopped cheering me on.
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List of Abbreviations

ASCA………American School Counselor Association
EFECT…….Education for Effective Collaborative Training
GED… …..Graduation Equivalent Degree
GPA……….Grade Point Average
NCSE……. National Center for Education Statistics
PSC………. Professional School Counselor
RAPS ……….Research Assessment Package for Schools
REACH…. Rendering Educational Assistance through Caring Hands
SDQ… …..Strengths Difficulties Questionnaire
SEI….. …..Student Engagement Instrument
SES… …..Socio Economic Status
TRAILS…..Tracking Adolescents’ Individual Lives Survey
Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Background of the Problem

Studies indicate that truant students face multiple barriers related to family, economic, personal, and school related factors (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Sommer, 1985 (a); Berndt & Keef, 1995; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DeSocio et al., 2007; Garrison, 2006; Hallfors et al., 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Suh, Suh & Houston, 2007; Tinga, & Ormel, 2010; Veenstera, Lindenberg). Conditions such as family socioeconomic status (SES) and school environment are beyond the student’s control to change. However, personal factors such as attachment, engagement, and empowerment are internal constructs that can change. Studies conducted by Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, and Lehr (2004); Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006); Bemak, Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005); and Klem and Coonnell (2004) have implemented intervention programs that focused on changes in student attachment, engagement, or empowerment to evaluate the effects on student truancy rates. These studies indicated high correlates between interventions that targeted attachment, engagement, or empowerment and student outcomes related to self-concept and attendance. Although there is no national data on national truancy rates, data does indicate that in 2006-2007, 4.4% of the nation’s students between the grades of 9 and 12 dropped out of school without earning a high school diploma or a GED (National Center
for Education Statistics). Research indicates that student truancy is significantly related to dropout (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DeSocio, 2007; NCSE 2007; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Sommer, 1985). The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) (2005) reports that in the academic year 2004-2005 more than 400,000 students dropped out of school in the United States. The repercussions of chronic truancy can result in lower annual wages, unemployment, criminal activity, and increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse (CDF, 2005; Reio, Jr., Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009). High school dropouts make up 30 percent of federal and 40 percent of state prison inmates (CDF). Individuals who do not complete high school are three times more likely to be welfare recipients than those who complete high school but do not attend college (CDF). In 2003 individuals who did not earn a high school diploma earned an average of $6,780 less per year than those who did attain a high school diploma (CDF, 2005). Between 1979 and 1995, “Americans with less than a high school diploma saw their mean family income decline by 14 percent… while college graduates’ mean income rose 14 percent” (CDF, p. 87). Individuals with a college degree earn from twice as much to four times as much as individuals with a high school degree (CDF).

Students who reach high school graduation have more employment opportunities, higher wages, and overall better life outcomes than those who do not complete high school (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Educators have a role in providing high quality educational services to all students but, in order to provide students with such educational opportunities, they must first be in school. Student attendance is of high concern to educators, parents, community members, and other
stakeholders. To address these concerns schools, community social support agencies, and local judicial systems provide various interventions, incentives, and sanctions to assist students and families to help students maintain consistent school attendance.

Professional school counselors (PSCs) can play a vital role to help keep truant students in school by providing school-based interventions that target the personal barriers of attachment, engagement, and empowerment that may limit success in school. ASCA national standards encourage PSCs to demonstrate accountability for student outcomes. As pointed out by White and Kelly (2010) and Dahir and Stone (2009), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) emphasizes the role of the school counselor in assisting students with academic performance and social and emotional well-being. Such emphasis on the school counselor is well-placed in that school counselors are positioned to have access to student information via cumulative records and dialogue with teachers and parents that can be translated to student-centered interventions tailored to meet individual student needs.

**Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study**

Attachment, social engagement, and empowerment theories guide the research conducted in this study. A considerable amount of research has shown the correlation between student engagement and attachment and school attendance. When students are engaged in school (Christenson et al., 2008; Finn, 1993; Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Riccomini, Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2005; Stout & Christenson, 2009), and demonstrate attachment, or belonging (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Bemak et al., 2005; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Blum &
Jones, 1993; DiScocio et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Reio, Jr. et al.; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Veenstra, et al., 2010; Wirth-Bond, Coyne & Adams, 1991), students are more likely to attend school on a regular basis. More recently, some research has also identified the correlates between empowerment and school attendance (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009). This research shows that students who feel cared about in the school environment also report feeling empowered to make choices to attend school regardless of pre-existing barriers.

Truancy is associated with empowerment in that self-regulation, personal investment, self-efficacy, and self-perception can act as forces that affect attachment and engagement with others and with the school environment (Bemak et al.; Enea & Dafinoiu). These three concepts are triangulated in that attachment, engagement, and empowerment are all influential factors in the formation of functional social bonds, which are essential to school engagement and, hence, school attendance and academic performance.

**Attachment.** According to Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Hirschi (1969), attachment experiences begin to form in early childhood and are later generalized into other social relationships with peers and caretakers outside of the home. “Attachment is the emotional and social bonding between children and parents, and a determinant of relating patterns in adolescence and adulthood” (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009, p.53). Several recent studies have begun to investigate the relationship between attachment and learning-related outcomes, including student attendance rates (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Bemak et al., 2005; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Blum & Jones, 1993; DiScocio et
According to Hirschi, when attachment is strong individuals bond with their family, school, and community; however, when it is weak, they are more likely to engage in socially inappropriate or delinquent behaviors such as vandalism, bullying, theft, and drug experimentation. By extension, adolescents are more likely to complete school when they have positive feelings of attachment toward their peers, teachers, and school. (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009, p.55)

Attachment of social bonds with teachers and others in the school environment and engagement in the school environment have been shown to be positively linked with learning outcomes (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009). Researchers postulate that this is because attachment to others provides support within the educational environment. This is especially important for students with high risk indicators such as low SES status, learning difficulties, or unstable home environments due to various factors. The school environment requires students to engage in curriculum, teacher instruction, and often to peers as a part of the educational process. When students struggle with forming secure attachments in the school environment they are deprived of social and cognitive interactions that are essential to engaging in educational activities.

Engagement. School engagement is the academic, behavioral, cognitive and affective involvement students demonstrate in the school environment (Christenson et al., 2008; Finn, 1993; Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Riccomini, Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2005; Stout & Christenson, 2009). In order to address student engagement, the student’s motivation to learn and sense of connection with the school environment must also be considered (Stout & Christenson). It is necessary that students engage in the academic process in order to learn. School
engagement skills include student motivation to learn, ability to stay on task, listening to instruction, academic organization, school attendance, and other school related characteristics and competencies that indicate some type of involvement with school be it behavioral, cognitive or emotional. To measure student engagement researchers measure student school-related behavioral skills. Highly engaged students demonstrate homework completion, class participation, and report a sense of belonging in the school environment. Truancy, lack of student participation in the school environment, and reduced feelings of belonging are all characteristics of student disengagement from school and are early risk factors that can lead to student dropout (Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Stout & Christenson).

Engagement, in part, reflects the connection a student has with the school environment, including academic work, relationships with teachers and peers, and other environmental aspects. Academic and behavioral characteristics are observable, whereas cognitive and emotional characteristics are internal constructs and cannot be observed by an outside force (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Cognitive and behavioral engagement is related to student motivation. Student feelings about the school environment are factors that affect the degree to which the student will engage or disengage with the academic and social expectations of the environment. Students with high levels of cognitive and behavioral engagement also indicate high levels of personal motivation (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Christenson et al., 2008; Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Stout & Christenson). Cutting school or class is one form of student disengagement (Fallis & Opotow, 2003).
Empowerment. Empowerment refers to an individual’s self-awareness, assertiveness, autonomy, interdependence, and personal and social responsibility that allows individuals to meet personal needs (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). The concept of empowerment is strongly associated with self-advocacy which is defined as “the ability to assertively communicate and negotiate one’s interests, desires, needs, and rights” (Astramovich & Harris, p. 269). Minority, disadvantaged, and at-risk groups of students can benefit from empowerment strategies as these individuals have been identified to have barriers that correlate with academic difficulties such as school attendance. The benefit of empowerment strategies is that “empowered individuals experience a sense of mastery and control over life decisions” and become better able to take control over personal choices and subsequent actions that can benefit or limit life circumstances (Astramovich & Harris, p. 271). Empowerment entails self-advocacy, but in order for one to advocate for him or herself, self-awareness and an understanding of one’s needs is necessary.

Students with poor interpersonal skills, a limited capacity for self-regulating behavior, a negative self-identity, or living in disadvantaged conditions often indicate academic difficulties (Lane, Kalberg, Parks, & Carter, 2008; Bemak et al., 2005). Therefore implementing interventions that address empowerment may prove to be beneficial to students with any of these characteristics.

Statement of the Problem

While school-based interventions have been implemented to encourage truant students to attend school regularly, little is known about the impact of school-based
interventions on student attendance when attachment, engagement, and empowerment is taken into account for high school students (grades 9-12). Once students reach high school they become a part of an accreditation system where students earn grade point credits for work quality during courses and the completion of course requirements during an academic quarterly time frame. As these credits accrue they are tallied into a student’s grade point average (GPA) and comprise a system that rates student work performance that is utilized for high school placement, graduation, and future college placement. In order to graduate from high school and meet eligibility requirements for a high school diploma, students must accrue a required number of credits based on state requirements and school standards. Students who do not accrue the required number of credits are at risk of not receiving a high school diploma. Truancy has been identified as a major barrier limiting students from accruing required credits and meeting graduation requirements. Truant students are therefore considered an “at-risk” student population. Previous research indicates that truant students have low scores on attachment, engagement, and empowerment measures (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Bemak et al., 2005; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Blum & Jones, 1993; DiScocio et al., 2007; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lane, Kalberg, Parks, & Carter, 2008; Reio, Jr. et al.; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Veenstra, et al., 2010; Wirth-Bond, Coyne & Adams, 1991).

High school students are expected to take responsibility for academic achievement. Autonomy, self-sufficiency, and organization are skills that help people successfully complete job-related tasks and these are skills that high school students need
to possess in order to meet course related academic requirements. One unique factor available for high school students, however, is that school systems house all of the resources necessary to assist students with meeting these requirements. Schools have teachers, intervention specialists, school administrators, school nurses, school counselors, school psychologists, and in some cases, school social workers available to assist with meeting student needs. At-risk students need to be aware of the resources available within the school system and how to access these services. To do this students first need self-prescribed short-term and long-term life and academic goals, and a plan for accomplishing self-prescribed goals. If students can identify personal barriers to school attendance, there is increased opportunity not only for academic success, but also for improved life outcomes such as high school graduation, personal empowerment, improved social skills, and personal life management skills. Assets such as attachment, engagement, and empowerment can help students to identify personal barriers to success and work toward personal changes to remedy the identified barriers.

Based on attachment, engagement, and empowerment theories, this study seeks to understand the relationship between PSC led treatment and student (a) social bonds and support systems (engagement), (b) social skills development (attachment), (c) academic monitoring skills (engagement), and (d) personal self-awareness and self-regulation skills (empowerment) with at-risk high school students as defined by truancy. To this end, the subdomains of social bonds, social skills, student academic monitoring skills, and student empowerment have been measured before and after the implementation of school-based interventions.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if PSC led interventions will affect measures of attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk students with high rates of truancy.

Significance of the Study

The results from this study are significant because there is no information currently available about professional school counselor-led school-based interventions based on attachment, engagement, and empowerment theoretical constructs on at-risk high school students as indicated by high rates of student truancy. If the school counselor led eight session intervention significantly improves the engagement, attachment, and empowerment of at-risk students, it may decrease their truancy since these variables have been shown to relate to truancy. If truancy is reduced then academic achievement may improve because of the relationship between these two constructs. The results of this study might support professional school counselors implementing these groups as effective use of their time. These results can assist professional school counselors to adhere to ASCA guidelines in addressing academic, social, and emotional needs of students and to help students achieve high academic standards.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between PSC led interventions that address (a) the development of social bonds and support systems (engagement), (b) social skills development (attachment), (c) academic monitoring skills (engagement), and (d) personal self-awareness and self-regulation skills (empowerment)
on at-risk students as defined by high rates of truancy. PSC led interventions were
conducted with at-risk students and results compared to a control group to determine if a
relationship exists between PSC led interventions in attachment, engagement and
empowerment and student outcomes. At-risk is defined as students who have five or
more days of unexcused absences. The independent variable in this study is the PSC led
treatment interventions and the dependent variables are the measurements of attachment,
engagement, and empowerment in student participants. In this study attachment and
engagement were measured by the Research Assessment Package for Schools, the RAPS-
S version (IRRE, 1998), and the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton et al.,
2006), and empowerment was measured by the RAPS-S, SEI and the Strengths and

To this end, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the effect of PSC-led treatment on student attachment with at-risk students?

2. What is the effect of PSC-led treatment on student engagement with at-risk students?

3. What is the effect of PSC-led treatment on student empowerment with at-risk
   students?

**Organization of Chapters**

Chapter 1 introduces the problem and provides a rationale for the study. Chapter
2 reviews relevant literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this study.
Chapter 4 presents the results. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results, conclusions and recommendations.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

In order for students to receive an education they must first be in attendance at school. Numerous studies have highlighted the high numbers of truancy that affect our Nation’s schools, students, and communities (Baker, Sigmon, & Nuget, 2001). Some studies indicate that truancy affects hundreds of thousands of students each school day and is a strong indicator of school dropout (Baker et al.). The national average graduation rate in 2003 was 70% (Greene, 2006). According to the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), one third of the Nation’s students fail to graduate with a regular diploma within four years of entering high school (2007). Of particular concern are the long-term effects on students with high truancy rates, such as decreased job earnings compared to those who have graduated from high school. High school administrators rank truancy as being one of the most pressing concerns for student success and is subsequently identified as a contributing factor to categorizing students as “at-risk” (DeSocio et al., 2007; Sommer, 1985a). Numerous studies indicate that there are multiple risk factors correlated with the health and well-being of students with frequent truancy. Students who are persistently truant are at higher risk than non-truant students for educational failure, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol related problems, and
greater rates of school dropout (Berndt & Keef, 1995; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DeSocio et al.; Garrison, 2006; Hallfors et al., 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; NCSE, 2010; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Tinga, & Ormel, 2010). Because truancy can be linked to health risks that include suicide attempts and other unhealthy behaviors, Blum and colleagues (as cited in DeSocio et al.) conclude that truancy is a form of school disengagement that “must be considered a health crisis, as well as an educational crisis” (p. 3).

There is limited research available that has studied the outcomes of PSC led, school-based interventions that target student attachment, engagement, and empowerment on at-risk students as indicated by high rates of truancy. A need exists for more school-based research with at-risk truant high school students so that educators and other stakeholders can develop a greater understanding of what works to reduce student truancy and improve life outcomes of at-risk adolescents. Intervention programs developed to target at-risk truant students are implemented as (a) school-based, programs that are conducted within the school environment, (b) community-based, programs that provide support services outside the school system, (c) school and community-based, programs which include both school and community-based services or, (d) court-based programs, which involve punitive consequences that are enforced by local legal court systems (Burns, et al., 2003; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Wasserman et al., 2003). This dissertation will focus on PSC led, school-based programs that target at-risk populations of truant high school students.
Definitions of Terms

**Excused Absence.** Excused absences occur when a student is not in attendance at school for a reason that school administration deems appropriate such as student illness, a death in the family, a family crisis, and, in some cases, doctor’s appointments (Sommer, 1985b).

**Unexcused Absence.** Unexcused absences occur when a student, of school age (as defined by individual state laws), is absent from school without a legitimate reason for absence as defined by the school policy for excused absences (Sommer, 1985b).

**Nonenrollment.** Nonenrollment is a term used for students who never enrolled in school, were expelled from a home school, or students who opted to drop out of school as indicated by completion of a dropout form (Sommer, 1985b).

**Discharge.** Discharging a student is when school administrators opt to unenroll, or drop, a student from the school roster. Discharging, or dropping, a student from the school enrollment roster is typically done if a student stops attending school or has transferred to another school (NCSE 2007).

**Dropout.** This term is used when a student completes a dropout form stops attending school prior to the fulfillment of academic requirements to reach successful grade level completion or high school graduation.

**Truancy.** Although there is no nationally uniform definition of truancy, the term truancy refers to unexcused absence from school or classes either with, or without, the
knowledge of the student’s parents or guardians (Baker et al., 2001; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DeScocio et al., 2007; Sommers, 1985a). Truancy is a legal term that is defined by each state as a number of unexcused student absences from school attendance given a designated period of time (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). The term “unexcused” indicates that a student has not obtained an “excuse” or verification of justifiable reason for absence from a parent, guardian, or from school personnel (Heilbrunn, 2006).

Truancy criteria are determined by each state. In many states school districts have the responsibility to define truancy terms as they relate to those individual school districts (Heilbrunn; Sutphen et al.). It is difficult to compile national truancy statistics because a national definition for the number of days of unexcused absences that constitute truancy, as well as consistently defined ages at which students are mandated to attend school, does not exist (Baker et al., 2001; Heilbrunn).

Additional difficulties in defining truancy include the lack of uniform criteria of the specified number of unexcused absences that constitute “habitual” or “chronic” absenteeism and what constitutes a legitimate “excuse” for a student absence. (Heilbrunn, 2006; Sutphen et al., 2010).

In this study truancy is defined as unexcused student absences that exceed the acceptable limits of absenteeism as defined by individual school district guidelines.

**Delinquency.** The term delinquency refers to “rule breaking behaviors and status offenses such as stealing, physical and verbal aggression, property destruction, underage
alcohol or tobacco use, and violations of curfew and expectations for school attendance” (Kearney, 2008, p. 259).

**Compulsory Attendance.** State laws determine the age requisite at which children are required, by law, to attend school. These age requirements set the standards for compulsory attendance. If parents/guardians fail to enroll and enforce school attendance of his or her child, then legal measures can be taken against the parents/guardians due to the truancy of the child. Each state, or school district in some states, determines the number of absences that define truant behavior (Sutphen et al., 2010). Compulsory attendance laws set the required parameters of how many days or weeks children must attend school (Sommer, 1985a). Each state determines school age requirements for compulsory attendance. Entry age requirements vary from 5 years of age to 8 years of age and school completion age varies from 16 years of age to 18 years of age. In Pennsylvania compulsory attendance is from age 8 to age 17. In New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Virginia, compulsory attendance age is from age 5 to age 18, whereas in Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Vermont compulsory attendance age is from age 7 to age 16. All other states have compulsory attendance laws that are between the ages of 7 and 18 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2001).

**Effects of Truancy**

Students with high rates of truancy have been shown to have high correlations with other risky behaviors such as teen pregnancy, involvement in the juvenile justice
system, school dropout, alcohol and other substance abuse, psychological distress, low self-esteem, depression, and lack of attachment to peers (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Garrison, 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Suh et al., 2007; Veenstra et al., 2010). Adolescents who have high correlates with these characteristics also have high correlates with poor attachment, poor interpersonal skills, and low levels of empowerment.

**Negative Effects of Truancy on Education.** The California Department of Education (2010) indicates that from grades 9 to 12 the dropout rate for the state was 15.3% of total enrollment in the 2007-2008 academic year. According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) the rate of dropout for students age 15 through 24 was 4.8% in the year 2000. However, no one knows the exact dropout rate because of the various methods of data collection that states employ, the unknown numbers of students who withdraw from school and do not re-enroll in another school, and schools that withdraw students who simply stop returning to school (NCSE, 2010). It is also difficult to get accurate dropout data because of policies that allow schools to discharge truant students. Schools may discharge, or drop students from the school enrollment roster, if they elect to do so. Typically this is done if a student stops attending school or has transferred to another school (NCSE, 2007). Discharge data is not required to be included in state dropout statistics.

**Negative Effects of Truancy on Student Behavior.** The NCSE has numerous citations that link truancy to substance abuse. Students who have high rates of unexcused absences are shown to also have higher rates of marijuana use and higher rates of drug and alcohol use (Hallfors et al., 2006; NCSE, 2007). A study conducted by Hallfors et al.
(2006), indicated a correlation between an increased risk for students to engage in substance use, suicidal behaviors, and history of delinquency with student GPA, attendance, and teacher referral for students considered at-risk for behavioral or academic concerns.

Truancy studies have shown a strong link between truancy and delinquent and criminal behaviors (Garrison, 2006; Hallfors et al., 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Solomon, 1985a). A study conducted by Berndt and Keef concluded that, “adolescents’ adjustment to school is influenced by their friends’ characteristics and by the features of these friendships” (1995, p. 1325). Interestingly, the results of this study indicated that “adolescents who described their relationships as having more positive features were more involved in school” and “adolescents whose friendships had more negative features were less involved in school and more disruptive” (p. 1327). Students who have developed strong attachments and healthy bonds tend to have less engagement in delinquent or criminal behaviors.

High levels of psychological stress, depression, anxiety, low levels of self-esteem, feelings of not fitting in with peers, alienation from teachers, and negative views about the benefits of school are additional factors that can lead to truancy and are all characteristics of attachment, engagement or empowerment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Garrison, 2006; Kearney, 2007). The study by Hallfors et al. indicated that students who exhibit “both high truancy and low academic achievement were at a higher risk for these problem behaviors, as well as suicide-related behaviors, than normative youth” (2006, p. 9).
In a component of the TRacking [sic] Adolescents’ Individual Lives Survey (TRAILS) study conducted by Veenstra et al. (2010) indicated strong correlates between truancy and the relationship between pre-adolescent self-control and self-regulation. Their study, which was based on attachment theory, indicated that students with stronger attachment to classmates had significantly lower rates of truancy.

**Risk Factors that Contribute to Truancy**

**Family Factors and Economic Influences.** Research indicates that family and economic factors can contribute to student truancy. Family factors that have been shown to affect student attendance and academic performance include lack of congruency between school and family support for school attendance and academic performance, family breakup such as divorce or separation, lack of parental supervision outside school hours, domestic violence in the home, drug or alcohol abuse, and lack of awareness of attendance laws (Baker et al., 2001; NCSE, 2010; Sommer, 1985b; Veenstra et al., 2010; Wasserman et al., 2003).

Economic characteristics such as parental unemployment, homelessness, poverty, household size, and limited transportation are influential factors that can contribute to student absenteeism (NCSE, 2007; Reio, Jr., Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009; Sommer, 1985b; Wasserman et al., 2003). Health or financial issues have been shown to be factors that may result in students missing school to help care for an ill family member or to take on employment to help the family meet basic survival needs (NCSE, 2010). A study by Henry (2007) was conducted to explore demographic characteristics, school related risk
factors, and drug use of 8th and 10th grade students, in correlation with truancy. The highest characteristic correlates with truancy in this study were parents’ highest level of education (high school dropout being the highest correlate), frequency of participation in religious activities (highest correlate being never participated), living situation (neither parent or father only), quantity of unsupervised time after school (5 or more hours), student employment (works more than 11 hours per week and an even higher correlate when the student reported working more than 20 hours per week), perceived likelihood of graduating from high school and college, and safety of the school environment (feeling unsafe most or every day).

In a study conducted by Garrison (2006) students reported they were truant due to missing the school bus or simply not feeling like going to school. Missing the bus could be an indicator of barriers to transportation, difficulty getting up in the morning, not getting enough sleep at night, difficulty with personal scheduling and routines, or other home life factors such as caretaking for others in the household or family conflict. Not wanting to go to school could be possible indicators of school-related or personal barriers such as a perceived unfriendly atmosphere at school due to learning difficulties, bullies, medical conditions, anxiety, fear, or depression.

**School Factors.** School factors have been shown to impact student attendance. These factors include school environmental aspects such as building size and ease of function, school climate such as attitudes of teachers, administrators, staff, and other students, disciplinary policies and procedures, such as suspensions for excessive truancies, and inappropriate academic placement (Henry, 2007; NCSE, 2007). School
factors have been shown to be linked to school engagement and the reported reasons that some students opt to miss school (Garrison, 2006; Jenkins, 1997). Uninviting environmental factors such as bullying in the school environment or inaccessible services to meet student needs, such as a student with environmental allergies, or medical conditions that affect the student’s ability to participate in school or attend to instruction, are additional barriers that may affect student attendance (NCSE, 2010).

Many schools do not consistently apply attendance policies and record keeping methods (NCSE, 2010). These inconsistencies make it difficult to identify students who are at-risk due to frequent absences. Sometimes there is a gap in efficient communication between schools and parents/guardians in the notification practices of student absences (NCSE, 2010). If parents/guardians are not promptly notified of a child’s absence from school it becomes increasingly difficult to quickly address the attendance concerns of truant students.

Some schools have what are called “push-out” policies that penalize students for truancy that make maintaining attendance seem punitive. Push-out policies can result in suspensions for “excessive” unexcused absences and/or result in the student receiving automatic failing grades for assignments and tests missed during unexcused absences. This is problematic for students who have high rates of truancy because, once a student cannot recover from failing grades, there is little incentive to return to school until a new grading period begins (Garrison, 2006).
Not wanting to go to school could be a possible indication of school related or personal barriers such as perceived unfriendly atmosphere at school due to learning difficulties, bullies, medical conditions, anxiety, fear, or depression. Poor relationships with teachers and other students also affect student attendance (NCSE, 2007; Wasserman et al., 2003). If a student feels as if he or she is treated unfairly in the classroom, due to cultural or racial differences or other diverse student needs or is the recipient of persistent punitive actions, and these concerns are not adequately addressed student attendance may decline. Bullying, problems with other students, and safety concerns getting to and from school are additional concerns for some truant students (Garrison, 2006; NCSE, 2010; Wasserman et al., 2003). Negative peer pressure and social influences that encourage school absenteeism, including parents who do not value education, also impact student attendance.

**Student Factors.** Student factors are barriers that affect students on a personal level. These factors are primarily emotional, intellectual, and mood oriented. Truant students tend to report a cluster of similar characteristics that might include any of the following characteristics: unmet mental health needs, drug and/or alcohol use, lack of interest in school, lack of understanding of attendance laws, poor physical health, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and lower degrees of self-control than non-truants (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Garrison, 2006; Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; NCSE, 2010; Veenstra et al., 2010; Wasserman et al., 2003;). Students with high rates of truancy also report feelings of not being able to keep up with curricular assignments, having poor relationships with other students, a lack of social competences,
and being generally less satisfied with school experiences than non-truant students (NCSE, 2007). Teen pregnancy or parenting responsibilities are additional factors affecting some adolescents that can result in multiple barriers causing school attendance to be difficult for youth (Wasserman et al., 2003; NCSE, 2007). Although studies indicate that boys are more likely to be truant than girls, gender does not appear to be a strong predictor of truancy (Sommer, 1985b; Veenstra et al., 2010).

Additional factors that affect student attendance are unmet mental health concerns such as post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse or psychopathology of others who live in the same household as the student (DeSocio et al., 2007; Wasserman et al., 2003).

**Interventions Based on Attachment, Engagement, and Empowerment Constructs**

**Designed to Reduce Truancy Rates of At-Risk Students**

It is beneficial for intervention programs designed to help at-risk truant students to have support from various stakeholders, such as school administration, teachers, school nurses, school counselors, social workers, families, local courts, and various community resources (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Frensch, Cameron, & Preyde, 2009; Heilbrunn & McGillivary, 2005; Richtman, 2007; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; White & Kelly, 2010). Programs designed to reduce student truancy are conducted as school-based programs, community-based programs, or court-based programs. School-based programs provide intervention services within the school system and may include educational, supportive, or mentoring components. These services are typically provided
by school personnel. Community-based programs include community components, such as after school programs, social work or mental health services, and other community health service providers (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Heilbrunn & McGillivary, 2005). Court-based programs include both incentives and punitive sanctions such as petitioning juvenile court, denial or loss of privileges (such as drivers’ licenses), detention, or suspensions. Incentives include motivators that are meaningful to students and their families (such as monetary rewards or recognition) (Heilbrunn & McGillivary, 2005).

**Theories that Guide School-Based Interventions for At-Risk Students with High Rates of Truancy**

School-based interventions targeting at-risk students with high rates of truancy address individual, family, peer, school, and community risk factors that may present barriers to students’ school attendance (Wasserman et al., 2003). Dembo and Gulledge (2009), identify components of school-based intervention programs that offer promising results. These components include school engagement (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; DeSocio et al., 2007; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Stout & Christenson, 2009), based on attachment theory, social engagement theory, and social bonds (Anderson et al., 2004; Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Hirschi, 1969; Sherry, Lyddon & Henson, 2007; Veenstra et al., 2010).

Some research indicates that mentoring relationships within the school support student engagement in school (Bemak et al., 2005; Blum & Jones, 1993; DeSocio et al., 2007). In a study conducted by Birch and Ladd (1997) “teacher-child closeness was
positively linked with children’s academic performance, as well as teachers’ ratings of school liking and self-directedness” (p. 61). Research conducted by Klem and Connell (2004) indicates that teacher support from various stakeholders has been shown to increase student engagement as teacher support is an important component of engaging students in the academic setting and hence, student academic success. This was found in both elementary and middle school students in their study.

**Engagement Theory.** Student engagement targets the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and academic engagement of students. Differentiating among types of engagement is difficult because many assessment measures overlap. School engagement assesses student (a) behavior, (b) academic involvement, (c) involvement in school related activities, (d) affective reactions, (e) feelings about school, (f) investment in learning, and (g) ability to remain cognitively engaged in academic tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Research designs that have focused on school-based interventions for at-risk student populations based on social engagement theory have included components such as (a) anger management training, (b) self-management skills training, (c) social skills training, (d) school engagement (including academic support, student participation in school, improved school performance, and developing a stronger connection to school) and (e) utilization of cognitive behavioral techniques (Christenson et al., 2008; Reschly & Appleton; Riccomini, Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2005; Stout & Christenson, 2009).
Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) suggest that some ways to measure student engagement include monitoring student: completion of homework, rule compliance, truancy rates, presence of behaviors that disrupt others in the classroom, aggressive behaviors toward other students, degree of effort and attention, interest in course work, degree of class participation, emotional responses, relationships with teachers, perceptions regarding the value of school, and feelings toward school. Engagement subtypes are: (a) academic (time on task and successful course completion); (b) behavioral (attendance, reduced suspensions, class participation), (c) cognitive (student’s perceived relevance of school work, self-regulation toward goals) and (d) affective (student identification with school belonging, perceived connection at school with peers and teachers).

Klem and Connell (2004) conducted a study for the Institute for Research and Reform in Education to determine if teacher support impacted student engagement and achievement. Their instrument, the Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS), measured students’ (RAPS-S), teachers’ (RAPS-T), and parents (RAPS-P) perceptions of student engagement. This study also included a school records version (RAPS-R) and an evaluation of the quality of school reform implementation (RAPS-CF) in their assessment. These surveys were validated for two populations, elementary and secondary level students. The results of this study indicated an “indirect link between student experience of support and academic performance through student engagement” (p. 270).
Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) developed by Appleton et al. (2006), measures student characteristics that fit into the categories of cognitive, behavioral, affective, or academic. This instrument is based on student self-report measures of behavior in the past school year, the past academic semester, the current semester, prior 5 days, and recent 5 days.

**Attachment Theory and Social Bonds.** Attachment theories suggest that the relationships that children have with their caregivers shape the ways in which the world and the self are viewed (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Hirschi, 1969; Sherry, Lyddon, & Henson, 2007). According to this theory, relationships with primary caregivers shape early personality development and the child’s perspective about others and his or her role in the world. Such perspectives and interactions are what Bowlby refers to as attachment styles. A great deal of research on truant youth investigates the attachment of students to caregivers, such as parents and teachers, to determine if there is a connection between poor attachment and truancy (Jenkins, 1997; Reio, Jr., Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009; Sherry, Lyddon, & Henson, 2007; Veenstra et al., 2010). In some cases poor or insecure attachment experiences with caregivers contribute to the development of pathways that can lead to personality dysfunction. A study conducted by Sherry et al. indicated that individuals with poor attachment present with a negative view of self. In their study, they sought to understand if “accessibility and responsiveness” (p. 338) of caregivers, in addition to the individual’s ability to “elicit need-meeting responses from that caregiver,” had an effect on attachment and development of personality styles and hence, positive life outcomes. The results of this study did indicate a relationship between attachment and
degree of personal functionality. Consistent with other research findings, Sherry et al., concluded that securely attached individuals had positive self-concepts and demonstrated greater flexibility when presented new information than individuals with poor attachment.

Veenstra et al., (2010) conducted a research study to investigate if social bonds, based on attachment theory, might be potential indicators of truancy at an early age. The results of their study indicated students with stronger social bonds correlated highly with higher levels of self-control and, subsequently, results indicated a direct correlation between low self-control and high rates of truancy. Veenstra et al. concluded that these results indicated students who had stronger social bonds were more aware of what caregivers expected of them and, therefore, were better able to self-regulate behaviors. This study sought to analyze the question of whether truancy might be prevented by focusing on student relationships with parents and teachers. There is some research that indicates group work can be helpful in assisting adolescents to form bonds and build empathetic skills and to promote self-regulation of emotions when under distress (Truneckova & Viney, 2007).

Some research on attachment and learning outcomes (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009), indicates student relationships with peers and teachers were positively associated with successful learning outcomes. The results of this study indicated strong correlations between secure attachments (student-student and student-teacher) and school completion. This research supports the idea that strong attachment and positive relationships with students and teachers increases the chances that students will remain engaged in the
academic environment and reach successful completion of high school graduation requirements than individuals who do not develop secure attachments with peers in the school environment.

**Empowerment Theoretical Constructs.** Bemak et al. (2005) conducted a study that investigated the effects of interventions that addressed student empowerment on academic success. This study postulated that at-risk students who faced home, school and interpersonal difficulties, would demonstrate decreased self-concept, and therefore demonstrate decreased levels of academic success. When students feel unsuccessful in the school environment and they are unaware or unable to access support systems attendance rates often decline. This is because high levels of psychological stress such as depression, anxiety, low levels of self-esteem, and feelings of alienation are all factors cited as deterrents to school attendance (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009; Garrison, 2006; Kearney, 2007). The empowerment approach used in Bemak et al. honed in on, “social, psychological, and environmental factors on academic performance” (p. 381). The goal of empowerment in this study was to provide interventions that allowed students to self-direct group discussions about the topics they felt impacted their own wellbeing, growth, and academic success. Self-control and group ownership were two primary factors guiding the empowerment concept in this study. According to Bemak et al., students who have a variety of risk factors in their lives experience a psychological recoil effect. Psychological recoil effect is the process whereby difficult life experiences are internalized resulting in higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety in exposed individuals. These experiences can further develop
into a sense of hopelessness and negative self-images and result in a lack of motivation and personal empowerment and, in some cases, result in delinquent behaviors including school truancy. The results of this study showed a strong correlation between student empowerment and increased student motivation to engage in social, psychological, and environmental factors related to learning. Motivation is an indicator of “underlying psychological variables such as competence, control, beliefs about the value of education, and a sense of belonging” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 212). Self-control and a sense of empowerment can allow an individual to make a choice about personal investment and can therefore serve as a motivational force to choose engagement or disengagement in life choices such as whether or not to attend school (Henry, et al., 1999). Fredricks et al. (2004) point out that students need to feel a sense of autonomy, relatedness to others, and competence to successfully maneuver within one’s environment in order to have successful outcomes. Individual autonomy allows individuals to feel a sense of empowerment that is “characterized by choice, shared decision-making, and absences of external controls, such as grades or rewards and punishments, as reasons for doing schoolwork or behaving well” (Fredricks et al., p. 78). Ultimately, students need to have intrinsic motivation to attend school and plan future goals for personal success and wellbeing.

School dropout is a gradual process whereby students disconnect over time (Finn, 1989; Appleton et al., 2006). Research indicates that this disconnect occurs due to family, economic, school, and student related factors. Empowerment is related to underlying emotional and behavioral processes such as those addressed by Bemak et al.’s (2005)
psychological recoil effect theory. Although empowerment may not be necessary for high levels of student attendance, it may be a necessary component for students with high truancy rates to improve attendance. This is because increasing empowerment calls for intervention strategies that address underlying psychological processes that can potentially motivate or hinder one’s personal achievement, such as in the case of attending school and maintaining life goals.

Appleton et al., (2006) views engagement as “a multi-dimensional construct comprised of four constructs: academic, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological” (p.429). The difficulty with this construct is that by grouping all four subtypes together it becomes difficult to pinpoint an understanding of where actual barriers are inherent for student attendance and personal achievement. Appleton et al., have noted that there are limitations to measuring what they term “cognitive” and “psychological” engagement (in this paper “cognitive engagement” is referred to as “empowerment” and “psychological engagement” is referred to as “attachment). This difficulty is attributed to the lack of clarity of these two engagement subtypes and that these two “subtypes [were] drawn retroactively from larger studies … [and] run the risk of not having a strong theoretical or conceptual framework” (p. 430). This study will break down the engagement subtypes of “cognitive” and “psychological” groupings proposed by Appleton et al., into the subcategories of attachment, consisting of student relationships with others and a sense of belonging in the school environment and empowerment, consisting of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and underlying psychological variables and will utilize the same theoretical subtypes proposed in Appleton et al. of engagement, consisting of academic
and behavioral variables such as homework completion, academic organization, and attendance.

**School-Based Research and Intervention Programs**

Research has shown that lack of student engagement and weak attachment to the school environment can be predictors of a student’s chances of becoming at-risk for academic failure, school dropout, and a variety of other health and social risk factors. Klem and Connell (2004) found that student engagement correlated with optimal achievement and that student disengagement tends to increase as students get older. Similarly, Birch and Ladd (1997) found that students who indicated high levels of school engagement had higher correlations with academic success than those who did not. Likewise, students who scored higher on school avoidance had higher correlates with low academic achievement. Given this information, it may be most advantageous to conduct interventions directed at various developmental stages that focus on a variety of school, family, and personal factors during student growth and maturation.

**School-Based Analysis of Truant Youth**

Veenstra et al., (2010) conducted a research study, with pre-adolescent children with a mean age of 13.56, to investigate if social bonds had a relationship to student truancy. In an extra analysis based on truancy records and student self-reports their research indicated that, “attachment to classmates had a significant positive effect on persistent truancy” (p. 307). According to this research pre-adolescent children who indicated high levels of attachment to peers and high levels of self-control were less
likely to be persistently truant as compared with students with low levels of self-control. The results of their study were based on social bond theory, which postulates that, “being socially oriented means that children take the interest of others into account and thus would be better aware of what is expected of them, which, in turn, increases their self-regulatory capacity” (p. 308). Based on the results of their study, these researchers suggested that reinforcement, or restoration, of social bonds between students and their teachers and parents, may have a positive effect on student attendance rates. To encourage this attachment, teachers and parents should discuss attendance with students, emphasize the importance of attending school, and provide students with positive encouragement for attendance.

Wirth-Bond, Coyne, and Adams (1991) conducted a study with high school students to investigate if support from significant others, invested school-based stakeholders, could make a difference in at-risk students’ decisions to complete academic programming and reach graduation. The term “significant others” was defined in this study as adults in the school setting that possessed desirable qualities as perceived by the students. These attributes included the ability to listen, and to be honest, supportive, available, and trustworthy. Although the study indicated most students felt they were cared about in the school and had access to trusted adults in the school system, results did not support the study’s hypothesis, “that students who had a significant other adult in school would be less likely to drop out” (p. 136).
School-Based Intervention Programs Designed to Target Truant Youth

Enea and Dafinoiu (2009) conducted a study to “assess the efficacy of a package of motivational stimulation techniques in reducing school truancy rates among adolescents” aged 16 to 17 (p. 185). This study focused on “intrinsic motivational stimulation strategies, motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling” techniques in conjunction with strategies that focused on exploring and resolving student ambivalence, fostering positive attitudes toward change, resolving problems, and utilizing behavior contracts to motivate behavioral change. By utilizing motivational interviewing, this study sought to help study participants with a client-oriented approach to enhance the student’s “intrinsic motivation toward change” (p. 187). To do this, interviewers used reflective listening (empathy), worked to help students develop a positive attitude toward change, helped students to become active in resolving problems, encouraged student self-efficacy, remained aware and respected that people usually change behavior at various paces based on individual wants and abilities, utilized behavior contracts to gain student cooperation and commitment, and used positive, solution-focused counseling strategies centered on student goals. Intervention techniques were conducted one hour per week for 8 weeks. The weekly sessions in this study were structured in the following way: (1) analysis of absences of the previous week, (2) utilization of motivational strategies, and (3) negotiation of a new contract for the following week. Each week the motivational strategies focused on a method of encouraging intrinsic motivation in the student. The results of this study indicated a 61%
decrease in truancy in the experimental group, while there was no change observed in the control group.

Newsome et al., (2008) conducted a study with students in grades 6-12 that provided interventions through social work services. These interventions included individual contact with students, school personnel, parents/guardians, and outside agencies. In this study researchers administered The School Success Profile (SSP; Bowen & Richman, 1997 as cited by Newsome et al.) in order to assess student risk factors in the areas of social environment such as their neighborhood, school, family, and peer groups. After interventions, the findings of this study indicated significant positive change in the areas of home academic environment, school satisfaction, self-esteem, and academic performance. There was no statistical significance reported in the other variables studied. This study indicated that interventions that addressed student influences in the domains of neighborhood, school, family, and peer groups can result in improved student outcomes; however, this article did not describe what interventions were actually implemented in the study.

In another study, conducted by DiSocio et al. (2007), researchers sought to determine if, “mentored relationships with teachers from within their own school and participation in school-based health services could affect youth problems of high absenteeism and school disengagement, which can lead to dropping out of school,” (p. 4) with high school students ages 16 or younger. This study selected teachers to serve as mentors to the study participants to develop a relationship and promote school engagement. The mentors were instructed to make contact with the mentees daily,
including follow-up if a student was absent from school. Contact included a daily check in, after school tutoring, advocating for the student if he or she was experiencing conflicts with other teachers, and encouraging students to engage in personal interests and peer relationships. This research included additional components to support students by providing alarm clocks, assisting with transportation needs where needed, and connecting students with school-based health services. The results of this study indicated that students in the intervention group were “significantly influenced” to attend school (p. 9). This was attributed to the relationship with a school-based mentor and the encouragement students received within this relationship.

In an innovative study conducted with 10th grade girls in a group setting by Bemak, et al., (2005), PSC interventions were conducted with high school females to investigate the impact of empowerment on academic success and attendance rates. Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS) is based on recognizing the influential impacts of social, psychological, and environmental factors that affect student academic performance for inner-city youth (Bemak, et al.). The selection criteria for this study included characteristics such as poor attendance, disruptive behaviors, significantly low grades, and reported problems at home. The treatment consisted of group sessions that were unstructured, yet had clearly defined goals that related to screening criteria listed above. Because the rationale of the EGAS approach was based on individual empowerment, the researchers elected to move “away from psycho-educational and traditional structured groups filled with exercises and activities planned by the facilitator” (p. 381). Rather the approach of this research study was to allow, “members a new way to
openly explore and discuss issues that created disruption in their lives whereby group process was utilized as the basis for group intervention” (p. 381). Follow-up from the study conducted one year later indicated that students reported: feeling better able to “effectively resolve interpersonal problems,” find support when needed, increased attention to school work, improved attendance, improved attitudes, and a more optimistic outlook on post high school educational pursuits.

The Check and Connect program (Anderson, et al., 2004; Sinclair et al., 1998) is a study that sought to understand the relationship between school attendance and the quality of student relationships with teachers and peers, and student academic engagement (e.g. completing work, turning work in on time, arriving prepared for class). The Check and Connect study has been conducted with elementary age, middle school, and secondary age students. Researchers wanted to discover if relationships with school staff and students could impact student engagement by utilizing intervention techniques that, “promote student engagement with school through relationship building, problem solving, and persistence” (p. 97). This program paid attention to engagement components of improved attendance, attending to classroom instruction, participating in class, student’s improved feelings of being cared for by the school community, and engaging in the school environment. The”check” component assessed risk factors that affected truant youth as barriers to attending school. The “connect” component consisted of basic and intensive interventions that focused on creating relationships between the school and the students and their families. The results of this study indicated that attendance, academic
engagement, and social engagement increased when “closer, higher quality relationships” (p. 108) existed between students, school staff, and families.

Another approach to truancy prevention is the provision of integrated services. A study conducted by Shepard-Tew and Creamer (1998), Project Education for Effective Collaborative Training (EFECT), researched the implementation of a model of collaborative services from school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses to meet “academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of school-aged children” in order to assist them with academic success (p. 141). This multimodal model extended academic, health, and mental health services to elementary, middle, and high school students and their families. The purpose of this study was to provide case-management and collect data regarding self-defeating behaviors that were causal factors related to academic failure. Intervention services included individual and small group counseling, school-wide drug awareness programming, screening and testing for learning disabilities, health education, home visits, family counseling, classroom behavior plans, parent and teacher consultation, outside agency referrals, and parent training groups. The effectiveness of this study however, is unclear as case-management techniques were not put into place uniformly by all team participants. Furthermore, children referred to the project indicated a wide range of needs, some of which required services beyond the scope of this study. According to self-reports surveys, participants reported that “students improved academic skills and behavior during the year they received services through Project EFFECT” (p. 144).
Blum and Jones (1993) investigated the impact that mentoring programs could have on academic growth among “potential high school dropouts” by conducting interventions with at-risk students in grades 6-8. This mentoring program, Rendering Educational Assistance through Caring Hands (REACH), sought to identify whether support systems could help students develop positive self-concepts and therefore, improve academic achievement. Project REACH provided tutoring, student progress monitoring, and opportunities for mentor-mentee enrichment activities through weekly peer support and daily one-on-one mentoring support. Mentors could be anyone involved in the school system that valued education, cared about the students and desired students to succeed academically (Blum & Jones). Student group participants were 6-8th grade students, homogenous gender, who were identified to have poor academic performance, low self-esteem, poor study habits, or poor interpersonal skills. Treatment lasted 8-10 weeks. Outcomes indicated certain student characteristics such as class participation, behavior and coming to class prepared improved, but attendance did not.

Using a multimodal approach, Gerler, Drew, and Mohr (1990), implemented a 10-session guidance intervention unit titled *Succeeding in School*, to determine if this program had significant effects on academic progress and classroom behavior with students in grades 6-8. Interventions were implemented by school counselors in 10, 50 minute sessions. These sessions included identifying successful people, identifying and developing skills to be successful in school, interpersonal skill development, and a positive outlook. The only significant change indicated in this study is that students
indicated improved attitudes toward school. There were no effects indicated regarding student attendance.

**Limitations of School-Based Programs**

Based on engagement and attachment theories and previous school-based research, best practices indicate that intervention strategies should provide skill development and monitoring in the areas of: (1) addressing barriers to student attendance that affect students and their families, (2) encouragement of student development of social bonds, (3) student social skills training, and (4) personal empowerment and intrinsic motivation of students. The school-based research studies include some of each of these qualities, but none of the studies presented here have all of these intervention components available to students. Students are diverse and have equally diverse needs. It is unknown what student characteristics serve as indicators for intervention program type. If an intervention program is too limited, interventions may be missing the student barriers to success altogether. It also seems logical that intervention efforts should include academic organizational skill development, in addition to the above mentioned factors, since poor academic performance is one of the barriers to student attendance. Ideally, school-based interventions should provide strategies that encourage school-related social bonds, such as peer or adult mentoring, programming that teaches social skills development and student empowerment, and academic and attendance self-monitoring skills. Furthermore, such interventions should focus on teaching students skills that increase self-sufficiency and develop intrinsic motivation to succeed in school and post graduation.
Definitions of truancy between school districts and/or states can make it difficult to make comparisons between various studies and interventions. These factors can add to the difficulties of follow-up studies. Research needs to include more long term provision of interventions, and longitudinal studies in order to get a clearer understanding of the factors that affect truancy and the efficacy of interventions in an ever changing society.

Limited availability of information, difficulty to locate and communicate with families, lack of family engagement, and limited financial resources were cited by many researchers as limitations for some school-based intervention programs (Anderson, et al., 2004; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DiSocio et al., 2007). Family mobility, difficulty locating transient families, and difficulty gaining consent to participate in research projects prevented additional analysis of health problems and health service utilization in the study conducted by DiSocio et al.

Anderson, et al., (2004), cited school district punitive discipline policies, such as out of school suspensions, as a barrier to their research. The reason cited is that once suspended from school, students became less engaged in school and further behind in academic progress. This study also indicated that, in some cases, ineffective communication between teachers and parents presented barriers to the Check and Connect interventions. Greater difficulties were reported at the high school grades where students had more than one teacher as opposed to elementary levels where students typically had one classroom teacher. Likewise, high school teachers had more students to attend to than elementary teachers.
Program Evaluation and Continuum of Services

It is important to current and future studies to utilize rigorous research designs that allow outcome data to be examined. Programs need to measure results and effects of programs, treatment, and models to reduce truancy (Anderson, et al., 2004; Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; DeSocio et al., 2007; Heilbrunn & McGillivary, 2005). Empirical research methods are the best way to tell if interventions are effective. When conducting research, researchers should keep clear-cut documentation of interventions so that studies can be replicated and thoroughly evaluated.

Services need to be provided that persist over time rather than short-term or brief services. When interventions fail to extend over time they “fall short of addressing the complex network of problems associated with truant behavior,” (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009, p. 452). Optimal services incorporate various community supports, such as the courts, social services, and health care, to provide a shared responsibility and work collaboratively with schools and parents/guardians.

Need for this Study

Truancy is one of the most serious problems that schools face (NCSE, 2007). Henry (2007) calculated that based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s statistics of 17.1 million students enrolled in grades 9-12 in 2003, if 16.4% of students are absent from school on any given day, the estimated number of students with at least one unexcused absence would be 2.8 million students per month (p. 33).
Truancy has been identified as having a correlation with school dropout, substance abuse, delinquency, social aggression, depression, decreased self-esteem, poor attachment, limited engagement, and other life-limiting factors (Hackett et al., 2010; Henry, 2007; NCSE, 2010; Suh, et al., 2007). Studies indicate that close to two-thirds of students in the U.S. who drop out of school have some type of behavioral or emotional problem or a history “of some kind of psychiatric disorder compared to only 5 percent of high school graduates who do not go on to college” (CDF, p. 97). Hackett et al. point out that there is an abundance of research indicating an overlap between student mental health difficulties and educational needs therefore necessitating that school systems address mental health needs in order to adequately assist at-risk students. It is important that school counselors contribute to school and community efforts to address the underlying reasons causing students to be absent from school. Stakeholders need to address the underlying causes of student truancy so that children can have increased opportunities that will enable all at-risk students to have greater odds of reaching graduation (Baker, et al., 2001).

According to NCSE (2007), information regarding truant youth is in its “infancy” (p. 1). Empirical research data is needed to clarify student behaviors that result in truancy problems in order to help educators, and other invested stakeholders, to implement intervention programs that help at-risk students achieve academically. The only way that problems related to truancy can be ameliorated is to first understand the conditions that are causal factors relating to student absenteeism and to study the
effectiveness of various interventions that help truant students improve attachment with others, engagement in school related activities, and self empowerment.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) states that professional school counselors (PSCs) work toward promoting the success of all students at school, home, in the community, and in the world (ASCA website, retrieved, October 6, 2010). ASCA (2005) defines the roles of professional school counselors as accountable members of the school community. Part of the role of PSCs is to assist students academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally in order to reduce achievement gaps and help each student reach successful graduation. Students who have been identified as at-risk often need additional interventions to assist with navigating and overcoming personal barriers to individual success. Dahir and Stone (2009) call for attention to research by PSCs in education to drive professional accountability and to gather information about student learners. Although their article primarily focused on action research, clearly PSCs need to be active research contributors to investigate factors affecting student learning and interventions that are effective in assisting students to perform optimally both in school and in society.

If stakeholders in educational reform do not know or understand the reasons that students are truant from school, stakeholders are ill-equipped to resolve the barriers that students and schools face. PSCs are important members of educational teams who are trained and equipped to assist in the process of identification and intervention assistance for students who are identified as at-risk or who demonstrate academic, social, or emotional difficulties in the school setting (Bemak, et al., 2005; Clark & Breman, 2009).
White and Kelly (2010) acknowledge the alarming rates of school dropout that persist in American schools nation-wide. Part of the professional roles and responsibilities of PSCs in the schools, is to advocate for the implementation of PSC-led interventions to assist in preventing school dropout of today’s youth. PSCs must seek to understand the barriers that at-risk students face that prevent students from attending school regularly and find intervention strategies to engage students in the educational process. “Effective prevention of truancy requires a thorough understanding of the characteristics that describe truant youth as well as factors that may put them at risk for truancy. Unfortunately surprisingly little is known about the correlates and/or causes of truancy” (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Dembo and Gulledge (2009) state, “There is a critical, continuing need to develop and test innovative strategies and programs to improve the delivery of services to truant youth. Most communities lack screening or assessment and intervention services for truant youth, and large percentages do not connect with needed programs. They often fall through the cracks of the service delivery system” (pp. 437-438).

Research indicates that truant students face multiple barriers related to attachment, engagement, and empowerment. But little is known about PSC-led interventions with this at-risk population and if improved measures of attachment, engagement, and empowerment have an effect on academic outcomes. Before it can be determined if PSC-led interventions have an impact on student academic outcomes, it must first be known if PSC-led interventions based on attachment, engagement, and empowerment actually improve student measures in these areas.
Summary

Students with high rates of truancy are an at-risk student population that is of great concern for educators. The effects of truancy on student outcomes result in limited academic proficiency and place students at greater risk for grade level retentions. High rates of truancy also contribute to barriers that affect student high school graduation rates and can limit the quality of life post high school if graduation is not attained.

Research indicates that there are risk factors that contribute to student truancy. Students can face a multitude of barriers such as family, economic, school, and personal factors that may make attending school more difficult than for students who do not face similar barriers.

Much of the research on school-based interventions that target truancy are based on attachment, social engagement, and empowerment theories. These theories postulate that students who form strong social bonds with others in the school environment tend to have increased levels of academic and social engagement at school and have higher levels of attendance and academic achievement than students who have poor social bonds and poor school engagement.

Research indicates that best practices (a) address barriers to student attendance such as family, economic, school, and personal factors, (b) encourages student development of social bonds, provides social skills training for students, and (c) helps students acquire personal empowerment and intrinsic motivation to achieve success. In order to provide this spectrum of intervention services, most effective intervention
programs include support from other invested stakeholders such as families, educators, and community service agencies.

The study conducted for this research focused on school counselor led interventions. Therefore, student (a) attachment (b) engagement, and (c) empowerment were addressed and analyzed. This study addressed an additional intervention, (d) academic organization and self-monitoring strategies, to encourage student investment in academic success.

This study was conducted as a quasi-experimental research design with high school students in grades 9-12 in an urban school district in the Midwest. Interventions were conducted in the school environment by a professional school counselor.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Overview of the Method

Chapter Three presents the research methodology used to answer the questions regarding the effects of PSC led interventions on student measures of attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk truant high school students. The purpose of this study is to determine if PSC led interventions will affect measures of attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk students with high rates of truancy.

This research will develop PSC led school-based interventions designed to address and measure student attachment, engagement, and empowerment in at-risk truant high school students. This research seeks to understand if PSC led interventions based on the constructs of attachment, engagement, and empowerment theories are effective in increasing posttest measurement outcomes in at-risk students. To this end students with high rates of truancy, 5 or more days of unexcused absenteeism or more in a given academic school year, will be selected as at-risk students to be placed in either the treatment or control group. Students in the treatment group will receive PSC led interventions. Students in the control group will receive regular school based interventions led and monitored by school personnel. Students will be randomly assigned
to groups that will receive treatment interventions or participants will be assigned to control groups.

Student participants and their parents or guardians were informed of their rights and responsibilities if they chose to participate in this research study (Appendix A and B). Participants were informed that if any student or his or her parent or guardian wished to withdraw from this study at any time he or she could do so without penalty; if a student participant indicated an aversive reaction to the study, or disclosed to the facilitator or group an aversive social, emotional, or behavioral reaction, a referral would be made to the school counselor by following the school’s referral policies. Participants were informed that the confidentiality of all student participants was to be maintained to the highest degree possible.

**Research Design**

This study was conducted with a randomized control group pretest-posttest design. Comparisons were made within participants and within groups through a quasi-experimental pretest posttest design methods using the Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS; 1998, Institute for Research and reform in Education, Inc.), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2010), and the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton et al., 2006).

**Description of Participants**

Participants were selected from one urban school district located in the Midwest, USA. Inclusion criteria for participants required students to be enrolled in a public high
school in grades 9-12 and identified as truant based on having 5 or more unexcused absences within a given academic year. This number was chosen based on the school district truancy policy where the study was conducted. Students were selected based on meeting the unexcused absenteeism criteria and were identified through a review of student attendance records by school district personnel (secretaries, counselors, social workers, truancy officers, and/or school administrators). Participants were then randomly assigned to treatment groups. Other demographic characteristics such as age, gender, SES, and intellectual functioning were not determining criteria for participation in this study. There was one criterion for disqualifying participants which was unexcused absenteeism of students identified as having a medical condition. These students were disqualified from the study because medical conditions are not inherently contingent upon poor engagement, attachment, or empowerment.

Treatment and control group participants consisted of 6-8 randomly assigned students who were currently enrolled in the school district in which the study took place at the time of the study and were identified as at-risk due to unexcused attendance requirements of this study. Treatment group participants received PSC led interventions. Control group participants received regular school interventions based on school policy.

Participants were selected from one urban school district with diverse racial and economic student characteristics located in the Midwest. Demographic information was collected at the time of the study. Treatment was conducted during regular school hours in a classroom in the same school building in which students attended.
**Instrumentation**

To answer the research questions the Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS; 1998, Institute for Research and reform in Education, Inc.), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, retrieved from www.sdqinfo.com), and the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton et al., 2006) were used. These scales assess risk factors in the areas of: student engagement, student beliefs about self (empowerment), experiences of interpersonal support (attachment), emotional symptoms, behavioral attributes, and peer relationships. All of these domains are related to attachment, engagement, and/or empowerment.

**Research Assessment Package for Schools.** The RAPS-S (student version) was designed to measure student engagement, beliefs about self, and experiences of interpersonal support in elementary and middle school students (IRRE, 1998). According to IRRE the RAPS is designed to be used in the following four ways: (a) as a diagnostic instrument to provide information about a set population of “students or adults; a school or set of schools; or an entire district” (p. I-3); (b) as an instrument to evaluate if a program is having its intended effects; (c) “as a management tool for tracking whether particular change thresholds on key outcomes have been achieved” (p. I-3); and (d) “as a basic research tool to study change at the individual, classroom, school, or district level with respect to the relevant elements of the change framework” (p. I-4). Because the RAPS is designed to be used as an assessment tool for frameworks and outcomes, it is appropriate that that RAPS can be used to research diverse student populations. Because there is not a RAPS that has been developed specifically for adolescent populations, this
study will use the RAPS-SM (middle school version) which has been used with students between the ages of 7 and 15.

The RAPS-SM (middle school version) consists of 84 Likert style items that measure the three above mentioned domains and seven additional subdomains to which respondents are asked to respond very true, sort of true, not very true, or not at all true. The subdomains that are measured by the RAPS-SM consist of perceived: ongoing engagement, reaction to challenge, competence, autonomy, relatedness, experiences of support from parents, and experiences of support from teachers. To test the reliability and validity of this instrument student (N=2429) data was obtained from three middle schools in one urban school district and one middle school from a neighboring school district (IRRE, 1998). Students ranged in ages 10-15 and were enrolled in grades 6-8. 58% of students qualified for free or reduced price school lunches and were comprised of 44% African-American, 39% Euro-American, 16% Hispanic, and 1% other ethnic backgrounds. 49% of participants were male and 51% were female. Alpha reliabilities of the RAPS-SM composites ranged from .68 to .77 in the Engagement domain, .57 to .87 in the Beliefs About Self domain, and from .82 to .88 in the Experiences of Interpersonal Support domain (IRRE). The validity of the RAPS-SM was assessed by using point-biserial correlations to examine the strengths of associations between the criterion indices (IRRE). Correlations of the domains engagement, beliefs about self, and experiences of interpersonal support were all significant at p<.001 level.
**Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.** The SDQ was designed to assess 25 various attributes of children ages 3-16. This scale was developed to measure the effectiveness of interventions on emotional and behavioral changes of individuals who received interventions related to mental health services (Goodman, 1997). Appleton et al., (2006) contend that to measure what they term “cognitive and psychological engagement” and what this study is terming “attachment and empowerment,” needs to be measured by obtaining the student’s perspective of personal experiences and meaning within the environment. Based on this assumption, utilization of the SDQ as a measurement of psychological factors that affect student empowerment is a highly desirable instrument. The SDQ comes in formats that include parent, teacher, and student self-reports for children aged 11-16. The 25 items are designed to assess five behavioral traits: conduct problems, emotional problems, hyperactivity-inattention, peer problems, and prosocial behavior. The SDQ has been shown to be a good indicator of student internalizing and externalizing of problems (Goodman & Scott, 1999). The SDQ is used primarily in epidemiological research, treatment evaluation, and in clinical practice. According to Goodman, Meltzer, and Bailey (1998), SDQ self-reports indicated acceptable internal consistency, test-retest stability, and correlates with parent and teacher SDQ questionnaires. The internal reliability of the various self-report scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. These results were reported as 0.82 for the total difficulties, 0.75 for emotional symptoms, 0.72 for conduct problems, 0.69 for hyperactivity, 0.65 for prosocial behavior, and 0.61 for peer problems (Goodman, et al., 1998).
**Student Engagement Instrument.** The SEI (Appleton et al., 2006) is a 33 item self-report survey that measures four subtypes of student engagement: Academic, Behavioral, Cognitive, and Psychological which are further divided into five subtypes of engagement related to cognitive and affective subtypes consisting of, Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR), Control and Relevance of School Work (CRSW), Peer Support for Learning (PSL), Future Aspirations and Goals, (FG), and Family Support for Learning (FSL). This instrument was developed based on literature searches, similar empirical studies, and related scales. The scale was piloted with 31 randomly selected ethnically diverse eighth grade students (Appleton et al). Tests for instrument validity (Betts, et al., 2010) were conducted on a sample size of N=2,416 students in the sixth through 12th grade from two school districts in South Carolina (n = 418) and Minnesota (n = 1,998). Participants were comprised of 51% females and 49% males. Ethnicities of participants were 40.4% African American (N=780), 35.1% Euro-American (N=677), 10.8% Asian-American (N=208), 10.3% Hispanic American (N=199), and 3.5% American Indian (N=67). Factorial analysis was used to assess construct validity of the instrument. According to a study conducted by Betts et al., the model “indicated that the level of excessive kurtosis ranged from -0.037 to 0.61 and skew ranged from -0.84 to -0.28, suggesting univariate normality” (p.88).

The SEI was designed to measure each of the subtypes of engagement previously mentioned. It is important to recall, however, that what Appleton et al.’s, study termed “cognitive engagement” will be termed “empowerment” and what Appleton et al., termed “psychological engagement” will be termed “attachment” in this study.
Procedures

Research was conducted spring 2012. Participants were recruited based on the previous school year’s attendance records (2010-2011) and the school records for 2011-2012 up to the time of participant selection. Parents (Appendix A) and students (Appendix B) were provided with informed consent forms for participation prior to participation in the treatment or control groups. Treatment and control groups were conducted during regular school hours in the school participants regularly attend. Students in the treatment and control groups completed the RAPS-SM, SDQ, and SEI pretest measures one week prior to beginning treatment. Posttest measures were completed for treatment and control groups one week after treatment concluded. Treatment lasted for 8 weeks, students met one time per week for 40 minutes. Data was entered into, SPSS, a data analysis software program. Data was analyzed to determine if the null hypotheses would be accepted or rejected and results will be published.

Measures

The independent variable in this study is the intervention program which is detailed in the section below. The experimenter, also referred to as facilitator, was a licensed professional school counselor. All treatment was provided by the same facilitator. Evaluation maintained its integrity because students completed self-rating measurement scales during pretest and posttest measures. Pre and posttest measures will be conducted the facilitator in order to maintain consistent testing conditions.

The dependent variables this study measured are student attachment, student engagement, and student empowerment. Attachment was measured with the SEI,
engagement was measured with the RAPS-S, and empowerment was measured with the SDQ.

**Treatment**

Weekly interventions will be structured in the following format:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
   b. Students will have open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week.

IV. Social skills and attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose personal goals for the following week (Appendix E).

**Week 1:**

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will introduce him or herself
   b. Facilitator will lead the group in a brief activity so that participants can introduce themselves to one another. Activities will include:
i. Who I am (Appendix F)

ii. 2 Likes and a Dislike (Appendix G)

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring

   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)

   b. Students will have an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

      i. Facilitator will lead students in a discussion about identifying 2-3 academic or other school-related personal goals

      ii. Students will record their goals in a log (Appendix E)

III. Empowerment discussions

   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week

   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social skills and attachment discussions

   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

      i. Facilitator will divide students into two teams and will lead students in a brainstorming activity to identify ways that students can be involved in school. The winning team will receive first choice of small token rewards, however, both team will be awarded prizes for participation.

V. Student goals
a. Students will propose personal goals for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 2:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
      i. If there are students who do not bring their paperwork with them
         the group will discuss what barriers may be preventing students
         from bringing their materials to the meetings and possible
         solutions to those barriers
   b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s
      academic monitoring
      i. Discussion prompts will include:
         1. Was it difficult to use the forms
         2. Did you need help and, if so, were you able to get the help
            needed
         3. Are you getting assignments completed; why or why not

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or
      difficult situations in the past week
   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants
IV. Social skills and attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous week and for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 3:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
      i. If there are students who do not bring their paperwork with them the group will discuss what barriers may be preventing students from bringing their materials to the meetings and possible solutions to those barriers
   b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring
      i. Discussion prompts will include:
         1. Was it difficult to use the forms
         2. Did you need help and, if so, were you able to get the help needed
         3. Are you getting assignments completed; why or why not
III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or
difficult situations in the past week
   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social skills and attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school
involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).
      i. Students who continue to struggle with this will be referred to a
school counselor to explore personal interests and available school-
based resources

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous
week and for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 4:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
      i. If there are students who do not bring their paperwork with them
the group will discuss what barriers may be preventing students
from bringing their materials to the meetings and possible
solutions to those barriers
b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week
   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social Skills and Attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous week and for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 5:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
   b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week
b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social Skills and Attachment discussions

a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals

a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous week and for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 6:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students

a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring

a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
   i. If there are students who do not bring their paperwork with them the group will discuss what barriers may be preventing students from bringing their materials to the meetings and possible solutions to those barriers

b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions

a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week

b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants
IV. Social Skills and Attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous week and for the following week (Appendix E).

Week 7:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students
   a. Facilitator will inquire about students’ week

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
      i. If there are students who do not bring their paperwork with them the group will discuss what barriers may be preventing students from bringing their materials to the meetings and possible solutions to those barriers
   b. Facilitator will lead students in an open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week
   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social Skills and Attachment discussions
a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose and/or discuss personal goals from the previous week and for the following week (Appendix E).

VI. Facilitator will prepare group for group termination

Week 8:

I. Meet and greet check-in with students

II. Review and maintenance of student personal academic monitoring
   a. Students will review academic monitoring paperwork (Appendix C)
   b. Students will have open discussion about this week’s academic monitoring

III. Empowerment discussions
   a. Facilitator will prompt students to share and discuss any conflicts or difficult situations in the past week.
   b. Facilitator will encourage group support between participants

IV. Social skills and attachment discussions
   a. Facilitator will ask students to discuss if they have engaged in any school involvement or social activities with others (Appendix D).

V. Student goals
   a. Students will propose personal goals for the following week (Appendix E).

VI. Group Termination
a. Group will review personal growth and successes

b. Group will discuss how they will manage their maintenance of academic monitoring, strategies for resolving future conflicts or difficult situations, how they might be able to remain involved in the school environment, and maintenance of personal goals.

c. Facilitator will lead students in validating on another’s success and terminating the group process

**Statistical Hypotheses**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether treatment that addressed social skills development, school-related social bonds, student empowerment, and academic organization would improve measures of student attachment, engagement, and empowerment.

To this end, the following null hypotheses will be addressed:

1. \( H_0 \): There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the RAPS-SM scores of students receiving PSC led interventions and those who did not.

2. \( H_0 \): There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the SEI scores of students receiving PSC led interventions and those who did not.
3. There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the SDQ scores of students receiving PSC led interventions and those who did not.

Data Analysis

The nonparametric sign test was used to analyze pretest posttest data. The sign test was selected because of the small sample size (N=8); with such a small sample size it will be difficult to determine statistical power (Gibbons & Chakraborti, 1992). The sign test is a nonparametric, binomial test that is used to determine if there are significant differences between groups (Gibbons & Chakraborti, 1992).

Statement of Limitations

Limitations to this study may have included small sample size due to the limitation of selecting participants from one state and from only one school district. Another limitation may have been the methods of recruitment. There were also concerns about the lack of participants from parochial and other diverse school settings. A limitation may have been that the researcher was also the individual facilitating the treatment interventions. Additional threats to the validity of the study may include reliability of self-reports of participants and possible discrepancies in interpretation of Likert scale measures. Definitions of truancy between school districts and/or states can make it difficult to make comparisons between various studies and interventions. The length of time that interventions are implemented, 8 weeks, may also be a limitation to the study in that it may not be an adequate duration.
Another limitation is that the study was conducted with a limited population as opposed to various diverse populations (rural, urban, suburban, SES, cultural diversity, etc.). There may be other extraneous variables the researcher cannot account for due to the dynamic nature of the academic setting and the diverse extraneous variables that may affect students in their home lives. Maturation of participants or personal events can also affect posttest scores. One final concern is that pretesting can sensitize participants to the treatment possibly resulting in responding differently to treatment than if they had not received a pretest.
Chapter Four

Results

Sample Demographics

A list of sixty-eight tenth grade students meeting selection criteria was compiled by school personnel (Principal, Assistant Principal, and Attendance Secretary). Selection criteria required students to have five or more unexcused absences in the previous school or current school year. Due to scheduling concerns, the participating high school agreed to the participation of only tenth grade students.

Sixty-eight letters were mailed to the homes of parents/guardians of the identified sample and follow-up phone calls were made the same day or the day after letters were mailed. Twenty-three letters were returned to the school. Of these, sixteen provided consent for student participation and seven indicated non-consent for his or her child to participate in the study. All sixteen students initially gave their consent to participate. Students were then randomly selected for participation in the treatment or control group. However, two students who were selected for the treatment group withdrew from the participating school before treatment began.

Of the initial sixteen study participants, eight completed both pre-test and post-test surveys. Eight completed the pretest survey only and were, therefore, omitted from data analysis. Two participants withdrew from the study after completing the pre-test and six participants were absent the day of the post-test.
Interventions were conducted one day per week, for forty to fifty minutes, over an eight week duration in a conference room in the same school students attended. Pre-test measures were taken one week prior to interventions and again following the completion of interventions. Pre-test and post-test measurements were taken in a large group classroom setting including all test and control group participants. Sessions for weeks five and six were cancelled by school administrators due to state academic testing which resulted in schedule changes (week five) and a school athletic team made it to state championship which resulted in cancelled classes in order to hold a school-wide pep rally (week six). Table 1 displays attendance for each intervention session.

Table 1
Session Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Number of participants in attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Session 5</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Session 6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 6</td>
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Statistical Analysis

The RAPS-SM, SEI, and SDQ were analyzed independently using SPSS. The non-parametric analysis, the Sign test, was used to analyze ordinal data for independent and dependent variables. For this study, a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ was set for the
data analysis due to the small sample size (N=8). The Sign test was selected because of its ability to measure for pre-test and post-test differences and this study meets the required assumptions for the sign test: the differences for $z$ are assumed to be independent, each $z$ comes from the same continuous population, and the values $x$ and $y$ represent are ordered (Sansone, Morf, & Panter, 2004).

**Results of Hypotheses**

**Null Hypothesis 1**

1. $H_0$: There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the RAPS-SM scores for engagement of students receiving the school-based truancy reduction interventions and those who did not.

The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. There is no statistically significant difference at the $p \leq .05$ level between the pre-test and post-test scores on the RAPS-SM for engagement. A sign test was conducted to compare treatment and control groups to evaluate if there was a change in engagement between pre-test and post-test assessments. The results indicated no significant difference, $z = -2.084$, $p \leq .05$. In a post hoc analysis there was a significant difference, $z = .250$, $p \leq .05$ in scores for motivation between treatment and control groups in the pre-test assessment. Overall, the treatment group indicated higher levels of positive self-assessment with a mean rank of 2.75 for the treatment group and 6.25 for the control group. There was no significant difference, $z = 1.000$, $p \leq .05$, between pre-test and post-test results for control or treatment groups.
Null Hypothesis 2

2. $H_0$: There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the SEI scores for attachment of students receiving the school-based truancy reduction interventions and those who did not.

The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. There is no statistically significant difference at the $p \leq .05$ level between the pre-test and post-test scores on the SEI for attachment. A sign test was conducted to compare treatment and control groups to evaluate if there was a change in attachment between pre-test and post-test assessments. There was no significant difference between groups on pre-test and post-test results for treatment and control groups $z = .343, p \leq .05$.

Null Hypothesis 3

3. $H_0$: There will be no statistically significant difference at the alpha = .05 level the SDQ scores for empowerment of students receiving the school-based truancy reduction interventions and those who did not.

The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. There is no statistically significant difference at the $p \leq .05$ level between the pre-test and post-test scores on the SDQ for empowerment. There is no statistically significant difference at the $p \leq .05$ level between the pre-test and post-test scores on the SEI for empowerment. There was no significant difference, $z = .343, p \leq .05$. between groups on pre-test and post-test results for treatment and control groups.
Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate if PSC led interventions would affect levels of attachment, engagement, and empowerment in at-risk truant high school youth. Treatment and control groups were given pre-test and post-test assessments and results were analyzed with the non-parametric Sign test.

As indicated by the results, there were no statistically significant results in this study. This study analyzed the effects of the independent variable, professional school counselor led treatment on the dependent variables, attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk truant high school students. The researcher failed to reject three of three null hypotheses. Study findings, as well as a discussion of limitations and implications for future research, are discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Five

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between PSC led interventions and at-risk (as defined by truancy) high school student attachment, engagement, and empowerment. Three instruments, the RAPS-SM, SEI, and SDQ were utilized to measure attachment, engagement and empowerment. All three instruments have been tested for reliability and validity and have been used with children or adolescents for the above mentioned purposes.

This study was designed to measure changes in student attachment, engagement, and empowerment before and after PSC led intervention supports with at-risk truant students.

Interpretation of Findings

Understanding the attachment, engagement, and empowerment constructs of at-risk students may help school counselors target intervention supports to help students overcome barriers to individual success and help schools achieve higher student graduation rates. According to research there are high correlations between student attendance and high levels of attachment, engagement, and empowerment (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Bemak et al., 2005; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Blum & Jones, 1993; DiScocio et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Reio, Jr. et al.; Sinclair,
Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Veenstra, et al., 2010; Wirth-Bond, Coyne & Adams, 1991). The findings of this study did not yield statistically significant results; however, there are some findings worth discussion. In this study most participants scored within the normal range for attachment, engagement, and empowerment in the pre-test measures. These results may be due to limitations in the study or, perhaps, may indicate a change in characteristics of truant adolescent populations. If students are scoring within normal limits in pre-test assessments then there may be greater resiliency within this population than was previously thought. Another possibility is that the school where the study took place may already be targeting social and emotional constructs within its student population. Previous research indicates that truant students have low scores on attachment, engagement, and empowerment measures (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Bemak et al., 2005; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Blum & Jones, 1993; DiScocio et al., 2007; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lane, Kalberg, Parks, & Carter, 2008; Reio, Jr. et al.; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Veenstra, et al., 2010; Wirth-Bond, Coyne & Adams, 1991), which was not the case in this study. Therefore, a final consideration that should be addressed is the possibility that students did not respond honestly to pre-test and post-test questionnaires. Because participants scored within the normal limits for attachment, engagement and empowerment this might imply that they are functioning at optimal levels. However, high rates of truancy suggest that participants are experiencing barriers even though pre-test self ratings indicated functioning within normal limits.
Implications

The lack of statistical significance between the treatment and control groups could be due, in part, to the small number of study participants (N=8), the short treatment time frame, and the interruptions of regularly scheduled treatment sessions. This research is preliminary in nature. Research should continue to investigate the effects of PSC led interventions on at-risk truant high school youth in order to determine if interventions result in a change in student attachment, engagement and empowerment. School counselors are in a unique position to play a vital role in helping at-risk truant students to attain high school graduation and, hence, increase the chances of better life outcomes associated with high school completion versus non-completion (CDF, 2005; Reio, Jr., Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009).

Some studies, such as those conducted by Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, and Lehr (2004); Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006); Bemak, Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005); and Klem and Coonnell (2004) have indicated high correlations between interventions that targeted attachment, engagement, or empowerment and student outcomes related to self-concept and attendance. However, these studies have not been conducted with school counselor led interventions nor have these studies focused on all three components of attachment, engagement and empowerment in the same study. With that being said, it may be of interest to determine if the type of interventions has an effect on student outcomes and, if so, what factors contribute to student change in perception.
Limitations

This study includes a number of limitations. First, the small sample size, n=8, reduced the statistical power of analysis which hinders the ability to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of treatment interventions. The sample was also somewhat homogenous in that all participants were from the same school in an urban school district. The sample was comprised of 99% Euro-American and 1% Hispanic American with 50% male and 50% female. There was no information available on SES.

Student attendance could have affected data. No students were in attendance 100% of the time. Furthermore, interventions were limited to 8 sessions and thus did not provide a longitudinal view of the potential impact of treatment.

Student attitude may also have been a limiting factor. During pre-test and initial stages of treatment students seemed apprehensive about participation. Several students asked why they were selected and if they were required to participate. Some students voiced concerns about missing small amounts of class or study hall time which could have affected their responses. Additionally, student maturation could have affected student perceptions and therefore their responses to questionnaires. Individual experiences in high school can vary based on numerous external and internal variables that could not be controlled for in this study. Furthermore, behavioral responses and social adaptability vary per individual which could have an impact on student perceptions about the school environment.

The time, day of the week, and location the surveys were administered could have affected students’ ability to focus or their willingness to participate in pre-test and post-
test questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered in a teacher’s classroom which could have had positive, negative, or no feelings associated with it for participants.

It may also have been difficult for students to complete three separate self-report questionnaires in one sitting. There may have been alternate ways to assess attachment, empowerment, and engagement without subjecting participants to three separate questionnaires, each with a set of directions and protocol. It is assumed that participants answered honestly to questionnaires, but it is possible that some participants did not answer honestly, were confused by some questions and answered randomly, or felt uncomfortable by questions and answered in a manner they perceived as a desirable response.

There could also be limiting factors related to the culture of the school environment that could have influenced participant perceptions. It is unknown if teachers conveyed positive, negative, or neutral attitudes towards students leaving their classroom to participate in intervention, pre-test, or post-test sessions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

When working with at-risk truant students interventions should span through the course of the school year rather than an 8-10 week period of time. In this study attendance was a significant limiting factor to the provision of interventions. Without student attendance interventions will have little effect on student outcomes. Due to the factors that limit attendance in chronically truant at-risk students, it becomes necessary to offer interventions over an extended period of time so that researchers can determine how many intervention sessions result in a change in student perceptions of attachment,
engagement, and empowerment. Larger studies are also needed in order to provide greater statistical significance to the findings and to allow for a better understanding of the effects of PSC led interventions on at-risk adolescent self-perceptions. Future research might also consider conducting treatment groups from a school counselor who is already a part of the school system and will be viewed as a typical helping member of the school rather than as an outsider. It may prove to be beneficial to future research if some studies select students according to criteria other than truancy, such as identification of behavioral difficulties as evidenced by suspension, expulsion, or severe behavioral handicap identification.

Finally, future research may seek to gain a deeper understanding of student self-perceptions regarding chronic truancy and attitudes about self, school, and peers. For these reasons, including a qualitative component to investigate attachment, engagement, and empowerment with at-risk truant students may provide a broader understanding about the variables that affect this population that a quantitative study cannot detect.
References


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Appendix A

Parental Consent

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I would like to ask you permission for your son or daughter to participate in a study looking at the effects of interventions led by a professional school counselor on student improvement in attending and participating in school and to see if student attitudes about him or herself improve as a result of the school counselor led interventions. The project is titled, “Evaluation of Professional School Counselor Led Interventions on Test Scores for Attachment, Engagement, and Empowerment with At-Risk Truant High School Students” and is a dissertation being conducted as a part of the requirements of obtaining a doctoral degree. Specifically, I will be looking to see if group interventions that target academic organization, personal ownership of one’s academic career, and school involvement will change the ways students feel about school and themselves.

What is involved? The study will include about 15-30 high school students. Students who participate will fill out several questionnaires related to how students feel about school and themselves both before and again after the group intervention program. The intervention program will last for 43 minutes one day a week for 8 weeks and will be held at your child’s school. This project will be overseen by my advisor, Dr. Martin Ritchie, at The University of Toledo and the assistant principal at Whitmer, Mr. Ed Kaiser.

Potential benefits and concerns. I will do my best to accommodate your child’s schedule so that he or she does not miss important academic lessons, however he or she may have to make up some school work. Your child is not expected to experience significant discomfort as a result of participating in this study. He or she might feel slightly uncomfortable participating in group discussions, but he or she does not have to answer any questions he or she does not wish to answer. The benefits of participating include getting help with academic organization and self-management of academics, becoming more involved with the school environment, and feeling better about one’s self and one’s academic skills.

Participation is voluntary. Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. There will be no penalty if you do not wish for your child to participate in the study and he or she may withdraw at any time from the study or refuse to answer any questions he or she feels uncomfortable with. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects at The University of Toledo.

Confidentiality. All information will be held as confidential as is legally possible. Only the researchers will see the questionnaires. No names will be on any of the questionnaires. Instead the names will be replaced with identifying numbers and or
letters. Each participant will be informed that his or her answers will be kept confidential. However, if it is revealed that a participant in the study is doing something that is potentially dangerous to himself or herself, or someone else, I am required by law to inquire about this and possibly report it. This will be made clear to each participant in the study. The chances of this occurring are small, but it is important that you are informed if the limits of confidentiality before you make your decision.

Questions? I would appreciate if you would return this form whether or not you wish for your child to participate, so I know that the information has reached you. You may keep the attached copy of the letter for your records. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Layla Kurt, at 419-283-6050. The supervisor of this study, Dr. Martin Ritchie, can be reached at 419-530-4775. The Institutional Review Board at The University of Toledo can also answer questions about the rights of participants in research. They may be contacted at XXXXXX. In addition, both you and your child, if you choose to participate, you will receive a copy of the participant’s Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights is a handout that explains what your child’s rights are as a participant in a research study.

Thank you for your consideration.
Sincerely,

Layla Kurt, M.Ed., PC
Doctoral Student
The University of Toledo

Please check all the appropriate boxes and send this form back to school with your child or in the mail:

☐ I have read and understand the permission letter. I give my consent for my child to participate in this study if he or she wishes to do so.
☐ I have received a copy of this letter for my records.
☐ I would like more information about the study before deciding whether my child may participate in the study. Please call me at __________________________.
☐ I do not wish for my child to participate in the study.

Parent signature __________________________ Date ____________
Child’s name: __________________________

Please send this information back to school with your child or in the mail.
Appendix B

Participant Consent

**Study title:** Evaluation of Professional School Counselor Led Interventions on Test Scores for Attachment, Engagement, and Empowerment with At-Risk Truant High School Students  
**Investigator:** Layla Kurt, M.Ed., PC

I am being asked by Mrs. Kurt to participate in a special project. The goal of this project is to see if getting extra help from a school counselor can help me improve my academics, and the ways I feel about school and myself.

If I decide to participate in the study, my part in the project would take about 43 minutes each group session and would last for about 10 weeks. These sessions will require me to keep track of my class assignments and to talk about how I am doing in school. In addition, I will complete several questionnaires related to my attitudes and behaviors. I understand that all this information is very private and will be kept confidential.

I understand that all of my information and answers will be kept confidential. I understand that if I miss a part of class to participate in the study I will have to make up the work. I also understand that by participating in this study, I may understand better the reasons I have trouble getting to school and completing school work and, in the process, I may learn more about myself.

This project has been explained to me and I have been allowed to ask questions about it. I understand that I do not have to fill out questionnaires if I do not want to and no one will treat me badly. I can stop part of the way through and skip the questions I don’t want to answer. I understand that all of my information and answers will be kept private and confidential. However, I also understand that if I indicate that if I am doing something potentially dangerous that could hurt me or someone else, then this information is no longer confidential and the investigator will be required to report the information. I have read this form, understand the project, and agree to participate.

Student signature ________________________________ Date __________
Investigator ________________________________ Date __________
Appendix C

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## Appendix D

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Appendix E

My Personal Goals:

Long term goals:


Short term goals:


Appendix F

Who I am.

Each participant will give his or her name and use 3 descriptive words to describe him or herself to the group. Age, gender, or physical appearances are not eligible descriptive words however.
Appendix G

2 Likes and A Dislike

Participants are to think of two things he or she likes and one thing he or she does not like and complete the following sentence to the group,

“I like ____________, ________________, and ________________.”

The group has to figure out which thing is the actual dislike.